THE WORLD OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN COLONIAL BENGAL: 1876-1939

by

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Dhaka
in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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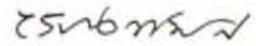
DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation titled "The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal: 1876 - 1939", submitted to the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (in History), is entirely my own original work, completed under the supervision of Professor Syed Anwar Husain of the Department of History, University of Dhaka. I further affirm that no part or whole of the dissertation has been submitted in any form to any other university or institute for a degree or diploma.

My Ph.D. Registration No. is 35/89-90.



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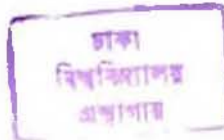

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the research work for the present dissertation titled "The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal: 1876 - 1939" was carried out under my supervision. It is further certified that the work presented in the dissertation is entirely original and ready for evaluation for awarding of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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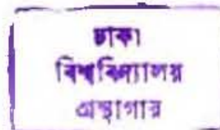

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Abstract

In broad terms this thesis belongs to studies on the cultural context of modernization in Bengal from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. So far, researchers studying the cultural, economic, political and social aspects of 'modernization' in Bengal with reference to the nineteenth century 'Renaissance', the great Reform Movements, and the Women's Awakening throughout the century - have overlooked the question of Muslim women. In specific terms, this study focuses on the emergence of the Muslim 'gentlewoman' or *bhadromohila* in colonial Bengal and links it with the broader reform movements of the time emanating from the Brahmo, Hindu and Islamic discourses. It also seeks to establish that this emergence as a *cultural* process was located within a larger socio-cultural reorientation of the upper/middling strata of Bengal Muslims, concurrent with the growth of the middle class itself, and that this process was symptomatic of a move towards an indigenous mode termed 'Bengalicization'. As such the women's question in this particular case was articulated within the problematic of Bengali Muslim identity.

The *bhadromohila* was the female counterpart to the *bhadrolok*. These two terms have been used in the main for Hindu and Brahmo Bengalis; this work, to a considerable extent, applies them to Muslim Bengalis as well. The *bhadromohila*'s unfolding story is examined in three domains: the family, education and literary activity. These substantive areas are each divided into two chapters. Chapters on the family deal with various aspects of women's life within the strucrures and functions of the traditional, patriarchal family, describe how they changed and review the discourses regulating these changes. In education we trace the shift from home education to a more institutionalized form in schools and colleges. The various debates on female education aired in the popular press are then analyzed in the light of reformist ideology. Writing was the first site of the *bhadromohila*'s self-expression. The last two substantive chapters trace the growth of literary activity through selected writings; and then turns to the construction of the new ideal(s) of womanhood in the pages of contemporary fiction.

The study concludes with the contention that a reconstruction of the above aspects of the world of Muslim women in Bengal from 1876 to 1939 points to the emergence of the *bhadromohila* through the process of a women's awakening. Though this marked a step towards 'emancipation', this in turn may be seen as a shift in forms of patriarchy - a movement from private to public patriarchy.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ii

Notes on Transliteration, Bengali Calendar & Abbreviations iv

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER I REFORM MOVEMENT IN A COLONIZED SOCIETY 33

CHAPTER II THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY 47

CHAPTER III THE FAMILY IN TRANSITION 96

CHAPTER IV RISE OF FORMAL EDUCATION 162

CHAPTER V THE IDEA OF EDUCATION 211

CHAPTER VI GROWTH OF CREATIVITY AMONG MUSLIM BHADROMOHILA 245

CHAPTER VII THE NEW WOMAN IN LITERATURE 280

CHAPTER VIII CONCLUSION 315

Bibliography 328

Appendix Selected List of Bhadromohila 353

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Notes on Transliteration, References, Calendar, etc.

Transliteration

All non-Englsih words (other than names of persons and places) have been italicized. As this work abounds with numerous non-English terms (mostly Bengali, some Urdu and Persian), for the sake of readability and typographical convenience, we have eschewed the traditional Sanskritized system of transliteration and adopted a simplified and more flexible one without any diacritical marks. In the case of Bengali words, this simplification is tantamount to ignoring the difference between long and short vowels and representing the consonants by their nearest English equivalents. The following table of Bengali vowels and consonants provides the standard transliterations and those used here (row marked ->):

	a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	ṛ	e	ai	o	au
->	a/o	a	i	*i/ee*	u	u	ri	e	ai/oi	o	au/ou
	k	kh	g	gh	ṅ	c	ch	j	jh	ñ	
->	k	kh	g	gh	n	ch	chh	j	jh	n	
	ṭ	ṭh	ḍ	ḍh	ṇ	t	th	d	dh	n	
->	t	th	d	dh	n	t	th	d	dh	n	
	p	ph	b	bh	m	y	r	l	v	ṣ	
->	p	ph	b	bh	m	j/y	r	l	v/w/b	sh	
	sh	s	h	ḍ	ḍh						
->	sh	s	h	rh	rh						

Remarks: In the above table, slashes are used to denote alternatives, which take into account the phonetic variations of certain Bengali letters. Use of the Sanskrit *antahstha v* (denoted here by *v* or *w*) is restricted to composite consonants only; it is replaced by *b* in other cases. The voiced variation of the *antahstha y* is denoted by *j*. The non-initial retroflex variations of *ḍ* and *ḍh* are not available in the standard scheme; we have denoted them by *rh* (for both aspirated and non-aspirated sounds). The *anusvar, visarga,* and *chandrabindu* are not shown in the table; they are denoted in the text by *ng, h,* and *n*.

Though these modifications do not accurately represent the true spelling, they are more akin to the variants of the Bengali pronunciation, rather than to Sanskrit or Hindi/Urdu. This practice, still not universally accep-

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ted, is in keeping with a trend to be found in the works of some historians like S. N. Mukherjee, Tapan Raychaudhuri, David Kopf, etc.

Some liberty has been taken with the spelling of certain words and names. For instance, instead of *bhadralok* and *bhadramahilā*, we have used *bhadrolok* and *bhadromohila*. 'Ruqqaiyah' has been spelt 'Rokeya', the latter being in use now. A few terms such as *bhadrolok* and *bhadromohila* have been used for both the singular and the plural.

References

For references cited in footnotes and bibliography, we have followed, as far as possible, the method developed in the *MLA Handbook* by Gibaldi and Achtert (New York: Modern Language Association, 1980). In referring to an article in a given journal, apart from its date, we have specified its location by a sequence of three numbers: **Volume: Issue, Page.** For example, 12:2, 34 stands for volume 12, issue 2, page 34.

Calendar

A large number of books, journals and periodicals consulted for this study follow the Bengali Calendar. We have indicated this by adding BS (short for *Bangla San*) after the year in question. To find the corresponding year in AD (Gregorian Calendar), one has to add either 606 or 607 (depending on the month and the date) to the year quoted. The Bengali Calendar is based on a solar year consisting of tweleve months: *Baishakh, Jaishtha, Asharh, Shraban, Bhadra, Ashwin, Kartik, Agrahayan, Poush, Magh, Falgun, Chaitra.* Usually, the Bengali New Year (1st *Baishakh*) falls on or around the 14th of April and the New Year in AD on or around the 15th of *Poush* (9th month of the Bengali Calendar).

Abbreviations & Translations

The titles of some frequently cited anthologies have been abbreviated as follows: RR for *Rokeya Rachanabali*, NG for *Nurunnessa Granthabali*, RKRS for *Razia Khatun Chaudhuranir Rachana Sankalan*.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Bengali texts have been made by the present author.

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THE WORLD OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN COLONIAL BENGAL: 1876-1939

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INTRODUCTION

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It is the objective of the present work to trace the emergence of the modern Muslim *bhadromohila* (gentle-women) and its linkage with the broader reform movements of the Brahmo/Hindu/Muslim communities in colonial Bengal and to place it in the context of the problematic related to the Bengali Muslim identity.

Recently research has turned to the hitherto bypassed lives of the women of the English-educated, professional Bengali middle class gentry or *bhadrolok*.[1] The term itself, which in popular parlance referred to a 'gentleman', is now under considerable fire from certain Indian scholars.[2] Some contend that the term *bhadrolok* as an *analytical* category has been thrust forth as an 'elite group' as a counter to the Marxian concept of 'bourgeois' or 'middle class'. Mukherjee, in his reputed study on Calcutta and its *bhadrolok* culture in the nineteenth century, describes them as the new social group in Bengal who held "a common position along some continuum of the economy, enjoyed a style of life in common and was conscious of its existence as a class organized to further its ends."[3]

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[1]John Broomfield popularized the term "bhadralok" in *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp.5-14.

[2]Sumit Sarkar, for instance, thinks that the *bhadrolok* were not a genuine industrial or commercial bourgeosie but "the educated classes... men with leisure, means of information and a position above menial dependence... professional men in town and country who very often had not severed connections with the land". See Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973), p.30.

[3]S. N. Mukherjee, "Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta 1815-38", in *Calcutta: Myths and History*, (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977), p. 26.

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Mukherjee retains the term *bhadrolok* as a social class (not just a status group) which despite the controversy, serves as an useful analytical category. He points out:

> The new urban class used it to describe themselves as a distinct group seperated, on the one hand, from the feudal aristocracy and the peasants of the rural areas, and on the other, from the English administrators and the urban poor [of Calcutta]... The self image and the world view of the Bengali middle classes were largely shaped by the idea that the society in Bengal was broadly divided between the *bhadralok* and *abhadralok*... between the cultured rich and middling classes and the uncultured poor.[4]

The *bhadrolok* were further divided into higher and lower like the *abhijat* (aristocratic) and the *grihastha* (literally householder) also known as *madhyabitta shreni* or middle class. Mukherjee maintains that the *bhadrolok* class was predominantly Hindu, and Muslims who could be said to belong to this category in the nineteenth century, were a marginal group. Though the matter has not been fully researched, later events point to the fact that the development of an urban middle class in the Muslim community in Bengal, saw the rise of a similar *bhadrolok* category there.[5]

The Debate on the Nomenclature: the Muslim *Bhadrolok*

As for the self perception of the Muslims in the region at the beginning of the present century (where, temporally speaking, we have located the concentration of social change), contemporary journals and fictional literature provide ample evidence that the word *bhadrolok* was in use. Sometimes the term is used in a semi-urban context, as in memoirs which

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[4]Mukherjee, "Daladali in Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century", ibid.,p.63

[5]The matter is dealt with at some length here, because a lot hinges on the acknowledgement of the term's applicability vis-a-vis the Bengal Muslims.

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depict life among the rural elite at the turn of the century. This underscores the fact that the Muslim *bhadrolok* were to be located often in a transitional or migratory population whuch was an aspect of the broad process of urbanization. Ghulam Murshid, one of the first to write a comprehensive and analytical treatise on the material and ideological world of Bengali women, has also favoured the applicability of the term to the Muslims: "In the present work I used the term to mean educated middle class including Bengali speaking Muslims."[6] The discourse belongs properly to a work on the rise of the Muslim middle class in Bengal and falls outside the purview of this study. However, to my knowledge, no one has clarified the matter.[7]

The difficulty over nomenclature is linked to the fragility of the position of the emergent Muslim middle class of that period within the existing social structure. In a sense, this may be viewed as another dimension of the problematic of Bengali Muslim identity. The quest for identity engaged this community for the entire period covered here. How were the men and women of the new Muslim middle class to refer to themselves, and how did others refer to them?

Classifying the structure of the community in 1890 in his study *Bangiyo Musulman*, Nausher Ali Khan Yusufzai incidentally mentioned "the daughters of the *bhadro* Muslim family" (*bhadro Musulman paribarer kanyagan*).[8]

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[6]Ghulam Murshid, *The Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization 1849-1905*, (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, 1983), p.10, n.5.

[7]Rafiuddin Ahmed, Sufia Ahmed, Abdul Moudud and others who have studied the rise of the Bengali middle class have not discussed the term's usage vis-a-vis the Muslim community. I leave that to future researchers and here touch upon some points relevant to my study only.

[8]Nausher Ali Khan Yusufzai, *Bangiyo Musulman*, (Bengali) (Bengali Muslim), (first pub. Calcutta, 1890; 2nd edition Gulam Saklayen [ed.] Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 1985), p.32.

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Yusufzai had in mind those wellborn families where women had sufficient knowledge of Arabic to read the Koran. But the connotation changed as the century wore on and the terms *bhadrolok/bhadromohila* were being applied to Muslim men and women in senses similar to those used by Brahmo and Hindu precursors. On this point we have official evidence. In the Bengal District Gazetteers compiled in 1925, O'Malley observed:

> Bhadralok is a name given to members of the three higher Hindu Castes, viz., Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas, and *Muhammadans of birth, breeding and education.* Nearly half are landlords, whose income is derived, in part or in whole, from the rent of land; one fourth belong to the professional classes, such as lawyers, doctors and priests; the remainder are clerks in public or private employ. All are educated, many are influential, their circumstances range from affluence to grinding poverty.[9] (italics mine)

Nonetheless, the controversy over the terminology and its application to the Muslim community continues to plague historians.[10] Some maintain that members of the English educated, middle class, Muslim, professional gentry, small though it was, compared to its Hindu and Brahmo counterpart, were referred to as 'Miah Sahib' in Bengal. But one feels inclined to contend that, increasingly, the occasional Muslim Cantab barrister, or Presidency educated civil servant, or the Dhaka College teacher, or Medical College doctor, came to think of himself as a *bhadrolok* rather than a 'Miah Saheb'. In written form he would probably opt for the English title 'Mr' rather than the former 'Maulvi', 'Miah', 'Sahib' or 'Shree'.

That the word *bhadrolok* and the object it stood for was coming into use in Muslim society, as was resistance to it, is evident from periodical

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[9]L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Faridpur* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1925), p.55.

[10]This surfaced at various seminars where parts of this work were presented.

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extracts, contemporary novels, and memoirs. The following excerpt from an article of 1907 illustrates this point and also shows that the Muslim *bhadrolok* to a great extent, was drawn along the lines of his Hindu/ Brahmo counterpart:

> They [educated Muslim youth] feel obliged to admire the ways of cultured, educated Hindus and to imitate them. These Muslims crave to emulate Hindu 'babus' and become 'babus' themselves, little knowing how the latter look down on them... Many Muslims in the hope of becoming 'bhadrolok' shave off their beard and discard their Muslim identity and even look down their noses at the pious men.[11]

In 1903 a contemporary periodical estimated the number of Muslim youth with higher (English) education at about one thousand. It also lamented that a large portion of them engaged in Government employ, frittered their wealth on "hats and boots from Dawson, and jackets, bodices and gold ornaments from Laidlaw House.[12] Some style themelves as doctors, some lawyers and others engineers."[13] As late as 1923, a writer in the conservative periodical *Sultan* lamented that western education had a negative effect in the cultural domain:

> Under the influence of English and the model of the neighbouring Hindu community, these youngsters are assuming half-Hindu or half-Faringi identity. We have no sense of our own identity, no sense of self respect.[14]

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[11]Ibne Maaz, "Bhai Musulman Jago" (Bengali), (Brother Muslim Rise), *Islam Pracharak*, Magh 1314 BS, cited in Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samoyik Patre Jiban O Janomot 1901-1930*, (Bengali), (Life and Public Opinion in Periodicals 1901-1930), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977), p.70.

[12]Dawson and Laidlaw House were two famous shops in Calcutta.

[13]Aziz Mecher, "Shikshita Musulmaner Photo", (Bengali) (Picture of the Educated Muslim), *Nabanur*, Asharh 1310 BS, cited in Islam, p.68.

[14]Mohammad Shamsuzzaman Eslamabadi, "Banglar Musulman" in *Sultan*,

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There were many derisive comments such as these showing anxiety about the 'Mill Bentham' addicted 'New Muslims' (*nabya Muslim, nabya dal, nabya Muslim sampraday*) and the perceived erosion of Islamic identity. Thus, in 1928 an article in a liberal periodical could lodge certain complaints against the Muslim *bhadrolok*: "The Sadler Commission, the Hartog Commission, - many such educational comittees have been formed. Educated *bhadrolok* [sic] who know their Mill and Bentham well, are even sitting on these committees. But is anyone giving a thought to madrasa education?"[15] It must be remembered that by then the atmosphere was politically charged and reformist and conservative forces were in confrontation.

This censure and disapproval suggests that the 'new' Muslim, the 're-formed' entity or the *bhadrolok*, was gaining ground as an ideal and a social presence all over again. However, the literature of the period, both fictional and non-fictional, contained more comfortable use of the term *bhadrolok* by men and women of all shades and opinion (e.g. Rokeya, Najibar Rahman, Nurunnessa, Fatema Khanam, Shirazi, and other publicists). The *bhadrolok* themselves were busy with their various projects of self-advancement or social reform rather than in declaring their presence. The ideal adjusted to suit prevailing attitudes and gained ground till it absorbed within its fold, all members of the Muslim middle class, as is the case today.

The Question of the Muslim *Bhadromohila*

Acceptance of the term *bhadrolok* in the Muslim context logically legitimizes the term *bhadromohila* as used by Ghulam Murshid and also by Meredith

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8:8, 14 Asharh 1330 BS, cited in Islam, p.73.

[15] Ahsanullah, "Mollader Prabhav O Sikshita Samaj", (Bengali) (The Influence of Mollas andthe Educated Section), *Saogat*, 6:3, pp.195-6, Ashwin, 1335 B.S.

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Borthwick, author of the book *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal (1849 -1905)*. According to Borthwick, the *bhadramahila* were "in broad terms, the mothers, wives and daughters of the many school-masters, lawyers, doctors and government servants who made up the English-educated professional Bengali 'middle class' or *bhadralok*."[16] But the '*bhadramahila*' were new social entities, in their own right as well, as Borthwick points out:

> By the end of the century (19th) there was an articulate group of women able to make their voices heard through public institutional channels hitherto confined to men. This type of modern woman became known as the *bhadramahila*... *bhadramahila* was... used to describe female members of bhadrolok families, but it crystallized into the term for an ideal-type, embodying a specific set of qualities and denoting a certain lifestyle... The model of the *bhadramahila* was created by the Brahmo reformers... They were consciously welded into a body with a progressive image, and seen as pioneers of a new way of life to be adopted by other non-Brahmo women.[17]

Though the *bhadromohila* of the Hindu and Brahmo communities have received considerable attention from scholars, to date, very little work has been done on the process of modernization among Muslim women.[18]

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[16]Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849 - 1905*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) preface, p.xii.

[17]ibid. p.54. My transliterations differ from those used by Borthwick.

[18]The widely acclaimed studies on the *bhadromohila* are: Ghulam Murshid's *The Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization 1849-1905*, (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, 1983) and Meredith Borthwick's *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905*. David Kopf's *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton Univ press, 1979), in recreating the entire history of the Brahmo community in Eastern and Western Bengal, dwells considerably on the Bhadromohila. Sambuddha Chakravarty's Ph.D. thesis *Unabingsho Shatabdite Bangalee Bhadromohila*, (Calcutta University, 1988) provides another dimension in that it lays emphasis on societal and subjective perceptions, through a study of literary works of the period. Monisha Roy's *Bengali Women* (Chicago: 1975) and Usha Chakravarty's *Condition of Bengali women in the Second Half of the 19th century*, (Calcutta, 1963), and J.C.Bagal's

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Borthwick herself comments on the lacuna in her study:

> I am aware of many gaps and limitations in the book that for reasons of time and space, have been unavoidable. The Bengali Muslim Bhadramahila has not been mentioned and deserves a separate study.[19]

Murshid who studied the same group as Borthwick admits that save for Bibi Taherunnessa, Rokeya Sakhawat and one or two ohers, he has not referred to women of the Muslim community. Muslims comprised half the population of Bengal in the late nineteenth Century. The Bengal Renaissance which had permeated the lives of the urban elite, touched this community somewhat later towards the last decades of the century. The process of modernization here with its attendant urbanization, growth of a middle class, western education, secularization and all-round projects of social reform, is often referred to as the Muslim Awakening (or renaissance). This has been well researched,[20] but very little is known about the Women's Awakening which was one of its facets.

Our knowledge about the lives and thought of Muslim *bhadromohila:* other than notable figures like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein or Shamsunnahar Mahmud is negligible. To date, there has been no reconstruction of the material and ideological world of an entire generation of women whose lives spanned the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades

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Jatiyo Andolone Banganari, (Calcutta, 1954) were earlier works which drew attention to the study of Bengali women.

[19]Borthwick, preface p.XII

[20]Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manos O Bangla Shahitya 1757-1918*, (Bengali) (The Muslim Mind and Bengali literature), (Dhaka: Muktodhara, 1964); Wakil Ahmed, *Unish Satake Bangali Musulmaner Chinta Chetonar Dhara,* (Bengali) (Bengali Muslim thoght and consciousness in the nineteent century) (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1983); Kazi Abdul Wadud, *Banglar Jagaran*,(Bengali) (The Bengal Awakening), (Calcutta: Vishwabharati Granthalay,1956).

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of the twentieth, nor an analysis of the transition to modernity made across two or three generations. And yet, none would deny the significance of the socio-cultural process that transformed in large measure the world which upper and middle class women inhabited, a world that was quickened by the *nari jagoron* (women's awakening) that started in the late nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. Early use of this term is found in the writings of Rokeya, Shamsunnahar, Nurjahan, Ayesha Ahmed, and Abul Fazl. The women of the 1890s (Faizunnessa and her generation) and of the 1940s (Fazilatunnesa and her generation) belonged to different socio-economic systems and were defferent cultural entities.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein (1880-1932), alone of the notable women, has been extensively researched. Apart from short biographies of some other well-known women, and a couple of M.phil. researches on Shamsunnahar and Faizunnessa, that particular age of transition in Bengal's history, remains in the shadows. Sometimes these women, only some of whom we know, worked in silence, as what one writer has termed '*Nepathya Charini*' (lit, she who walks behind the scenes); sometimes they came into the public gaze. These women worked and lived alongside the men of their household (the Muslim *bhadrolok*), wrote and thought and struggled for greater rights. It is to this lacuna in the historiography of modern Bengal, that the present study is directed.

The transition made by Muslim women occurred within the political and economic aegis of a colonial government and the cultural arc of the Bengal Awakening/Renaissance. The change was initiated by and on behalf of the small but powerful emergent middle class who were also in the front ranks of the cultural awakening of the Muslims.[21]

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[21]For the background and details of the awakening and rise of the middle class in the Muslim community, see Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manosh*; Sufia Ahmed, *The Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912* (Dhaka: Oxford University Press, 1974); Abdul Moudud, *Madhyabitta Samajer Bikash*

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

The Women's Awakening in the Muslim community was concretely manifest in the women's reform movement of the early twentieth century, which mainly sought to redress perceived social ills (such as polygamy and child marriage) and advocate female education, eradication of *aborodh* and generally improve women's status in society. The issues differed in some cases and coincided in others with those that had been salient features of the Brahmo reform movement. Even if the urban based movement did not touch the lives of large numbers of women (the *bhadrolok* were only about five per cent of the total Bengali population), the significance lay in the intensity and impact of the movement rather than on its numerical sway. The *bhadromohila* who participated in the process of transformation - Hindu or Muslim - constituted only a small fraction of the entire female population in Bengal. Nonetheless, they set the trend, created an ideal and provided the model for other women in the process of reformation.

The usage of *bhadromohila* to indicate the modern Muslim gentlewomen, however, like that of *bhadrolok*, is not universally established. Some interviewees who lived through the 1930s — e.g. Sufia Kamal (b. 1911) — recalled that when a Muslim woman of education and means (a beneficiary of the Reform Movement in whatever degree) was seen walking down a Calcutta street on her way to a relative's, or shopping, or to classes at Bethune - the words used to describe her would have been: 'bibi saheba', 'meye', or the more generic 'mohila'.[22] Others — e.g. Mehrunnessa Islam

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Sanskritir Rupantar, (Bengali) (Development of middle class society: cultural transformation), (Dhaka: Md. Nasir Ali, 1967) and Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[22]The appellations were age-determined also. An elderly lady would be 'begum saheba'; a young one 'bibi', and 'meye' was certainly reserved for young girls only. 'Bibi' as used in Hindu/Brahmo discourse in nineteenth century Bengal — as counterpart to the 'babu' — had a different connotation, of course.

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(b. 1921), Noorjahan Murshed (b. 1924), Rahima Khatun (b. 1925) — seemed to think the word *bhadromohila* was in use at the time. This raised the perplexing query once more: What are we to call the modern Muslim gentle-woman? The matter needs to be researched in greater depth than will be gone into here.

The use of the term *bhadromohila* for a Muslim woman can be traced back to Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani (1834-1903). She used the term to refer to herself as early as 1876 in the autobiographical note to her book *Rupjalal*. But Faizunnessa was not the full-fledged *bhadromohila* in the sense we have taken; she stood at the threshold, she was a precursor. But between 1876 and 1939 - the Year a College for Muslim girls was founded - the *bhadromohila* as a new social presence had come to occupy a part of the Bengali Muslims' world.

If we place the Zobedas and the Rabeyas and the Monwaras of 1920 alongside the Ashalatas, the Swarnalatas and the Anupomas, we see the close resemblance. At first glance one would not be able to tell them apart. They looked the same, spoke the same language, wore the same sari and chemise, inhabited the same geographical space and shared many vital concerns such as husband, home, children, etc.[23] It is only on a closer scrutiny that the differences would emerge - in religious belief and ritual life, in notions of a past heritage and mythology, and in political stands.

Literature of the period, fictional and nonfictional, abound with the use of the term *bhadromohila*. Too numerous to cite here, a few examples have been chosen to show the varying contexts in which it was used.

Mir Mosharraf Hossain, as noted above, *apprehended* the *bhadromohila* derisively as the "enlighten bidyabati, model bhagini" [sic] meaning the (so

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[23]The affinities of 'race, language and region' mentioned by Rafiuddin Ahmed, Preface, p.X.

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called) enlightened, eduacted, model sister![24]

Rokeya reversed the caustic, narrow sense above and re-instituted the 'enlightened, Muhammadan lady or sister' with all its glory. In her writings she hailed the new woman as *bhadromohila*. In her collected works the word "bhadro" in the context of Muslim society occurs many times (e.g. pp. 210, 282, 303, 304, 449, 474, 476, 493, 494, 546). In her speech at the Baby Show held in the Calcutta town hall in April 1920 she addressed the women as "Upasthit bhadromohilagon".[25] In "Dhangsher Pathe Bangiyo Muslim" she compared the Muslim *bhadromohila* to the women of the more advanced Brahmo Community.

Writing about life among the rural *ashraf* in 1910-20, Ibrahim Khan in his memoir, however, used the term in a semi urban setting and applied it to women who had arrived at a festive occassion: "The begum sahib had separate musicians in the *andar* - for purda observing *bhadromohila*. These *bhadromohila* arrived in their respective palanquins. In those days, the sharif used to maintain their own palanquin at home."[26] Ibrahim has equated the *ashraf* with *bhadro*, the *begum sahib* with the *bhadromohila*. Here the attribution was one of status rather than modernity. Nonetheless, Ibrahim also caught society in its moment of transition, a moment when distinctions were blurred.

Najibar Rahman a popular novelist, also used *bhadromohila* in his novels to indicate women of the semi rural upper class as well as wives of gov-

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[24]Mir Mosharraf Hossain, *Gazi Miar Bostani*, (Bengali) (Regrets of Gazi Mia), (first pub. Calcutta, 1899; 2nd Edition Dhaka: Mir Mohammadiya Khatun, 1367 BS), p.227.

[25]R. S. Hossein, "Shishu Palon", (Bengali) (Child Care), *Saogat*, 2:6, 404, Baisakh 1327 BS.

[26]Ibrahim Khan, *Batayon*, (Bengali) (Window), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1967), p.89.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

ernment employees - district magistrates, high school teachers, sub-registrars etc. Kazi Imdadul Huq also showed the world of social transition in his novel *Abdullah*, where all the above categories existed side by side and the '*bhadro sampraday*' was taking shape.

The word *bhadrohomila* was a descriptive category, as was *sharif bibiyan*, and not an honorific title like Begum, Bibi, Srimati or Mrs. The situation from our angle of vision is further complicated by widespread use of Sanskritized appelations such as Sri, Srimati or Srijukta, by the Muslims in nineteenth century Bengal before they were replaced in the period of later cultural reconstruction.

Nomenclature and Identity[27]

The cultural heterogeneity of the Muslim world is illustrated by the fact that though the *Wakf* documents of Nawab Faizunnessa's family were written in Persian, Faizunnessa referred to herself in more than one passage in her autobiographical note to *Rupjalal* as 'Srimati Faizun' and 'Srimati Faizunnessa'[28] and to her mentor as "Srijukto Tajuddin Miah".[29] Paradoxically, in an article in 1901, bemoaning the erosion of Islamic values regarding keeping names among Bengal Muslims, the authorship is set down as "compiled by *Srijukto Maulvi* Mir Mansur Ali *Saheb*".[30] The juxtaposition of so many apellations pointed to the hybrid character of the Muslim's

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[27] I am indebted to Prof. Mumtazur Rahman Tarafdar, of the Dept. of Islamic History of Dhaka University, for a clarification of various points discussed in this section.

[28] Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, *Rupjalal*, (Bengali),(The story of Rupjalal), (first pub. 1876; rept. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1984), p.10.

[29] ibid., p.3

[30] "Amader Nam" (Bengali) (Our Name), *Nurul Iman*, Asharh 1308 BS, cited in Islam, p.96.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

cultural universe. When Mr. Douglas, the district magistrate, intimated to Faizun that the Queen's government pleased with her philanthropic work had decided to bestow the title 'Begum' on her, Faizun refused saying that "in her estate she was already hailed as *Begum*",[31] thereby showing her preference for the non-gendered title 'Nawab'.

A similar picture emerges from Mir Mosharraf Hossain's *Gazi Miar Bostani* (1899), set amid the fortunes of a Zamindar family of northeastern Bengal in the 1890's. The work is said to be partly autobiographical, drawn upon Mir's experiences as the manager of the Delduar estate in Mymensingh where he worked for the late zamindar's widow, Karimunnessa Khanam (Rokeya Sakhawat's elder sister). Some of the characters which crowd the pages of *Bostani* were based on real life people. The most powerful female character in the book is referred to as 'Begum Saheba', and sarcastically, as 'Begum Thakerun' (to show her lapse from a Muslim identity to a Hindu-ized one). The picture was negatively drawn showing an immodest and wanton widow given to all the negative ways of 'western', non-Islamic culture. Mir's harsh censure of "the enlighten Muslim lady" [sic] as he derisively called the new entity, was very evident in his portrayals of the aristocratic women in *Bostani*, as was the ambivalence of the pictures drawn. For, the women were at once decadent and 'modern', purdah obser-ving 'begum sahebas' at home and purdah discarding 'Misses' in Calcutta's fashionable promenade ground 'Garher Math'.

In the various legal deeds of the family, the real life women : Mir's somewhat distorted portrayals represented, were referred to as *Srijukta*. The guardianship deed (written in Bengali) of Abdul Aziz Khan stated: "In my absence my wife *Srijukta* Rahatunnessa Khanam Chaudhurani *Saheba*, will administer the estates as trustee over my minor son *Sriman* Abu Muh-

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[31] Md. Abdul Quddus, Biographic sketch, in Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, *Rupjalal*, p.V.

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ammad Abdur Rahman."[32] Karimunnessa Khanam's husband also left behind a similar deed in 1878 where 'Srijukta Karimunnessa Khanam Chaudhurani Saheba' was delegated similiar rights.

Such ambivalences pointed to the complexity of the woman's situation from the time of Faizunnessa onward. She could be Begum Saheba to her subordinates; the *enlighten Muhammadan lady* to a bewildered and sarcastic writer, and *Srijukta-saheba*, in legal deeds. To us now it may seem like a strange juxtaposition of nomenclature and identity. Mir made it look grotesque. Actually Muslim women caught in the proces of modernity itself, managed well and survived in their "various universes".

As the *bhadromohila*'s contour grew more distinct, and modernization along modified western lines gained ground, women often opted for the honorific 'Mrs' instead of *Srijukta* or *Saheba*. This becomes apparent if we survey the titles 'emancipated' or 'reformed' women themselves used. The list of women who contributed every month to Rokeya's Anjumani Khawateeni Islam in Calcutta (founded in 1916) contained names of 35 Muslim women. Of these thirty had 'Mrs' before their names, one had 'Lady' (as her husband was knighted) and three were put down as 'Begum Saheba' and one as 'Nawab'.

The word 'Begum' existed since the days of the Mughal court, but its use by members of the non-elite is a fairly recent phenomenon.[33] In the transition from the medieval to the modern era, the English 'Mrs' gained great favour. Many of the Muslim women who wrote in the early part of the

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[32]Official record of subregistrar Mr. E.S. Andrew, Entry no. 595 for 1874, cited in Ahmed Sharif (ed), *Gazi Miar Bostani*, (Bengali), (The Regrets of Gazi Mia) first pub. 1899, (Dhaka: Mir Mohammadiya Khatun, 1961), p.xvii. (italics mine).

[33]Use of 'Begum' as a formal title or prefix (as an alternative to Mrs) in present day Bangaladesh is in fact a post World War II phenomenon.

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twentieth century, usually opted for a 'Mrs' in front of their names. Rokeya, Ayesha, Fatema Khanam, M. Rahman, Kasema, and a host of others signed off as 'Mrs' and were addressed as such.

Modernization and Bengalicization

The issue of nomenclature actually brings us to the cardinal point once again. How justified is the application of the term *bhadromohila* to the women of the Muslim Community in the historical context of the time? In a sense, in the answer to the query lies the kernel of the present research.

The *bhadromohila* was an end-product of a concomitant process of modernization and what we have called Bengalicization in a renewed context. For the Muslim community making its transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, modernization was necessarily accompanied by a process of indigenization much more powerful than other processes of acculturation at the time (i.e. Anglicization) which gave birth to the *bhadro samproday*. It was within this process of transformation from 'sharif bibiya' or 'begum' (in the sense of a social category, not a title) to *bhadromohila*, that the Muslim gentlewoman made her journey to modernity.

In the pre-colonial and early colonial period (i.e. from the 13th to the 18th century) there were broadly speaking two social classes among Bengal Muslims - the *Ashraf* whose culture was Perso-Arabic, and the masses or *Atraf*, whose culture was largely rural syncretic.[34] The "Faraidi" and "Wahabi" (*Tarika-i Mohammadiya*) movements or early fundamentalist/ religious movements had effected a widespread purging of non-Islamic, syncretic elements in the social body, thereby laying the foundations for

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[34]See Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), ch. 1.

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future separatism, cultural and political.[35]

But syncretic (in the special, historical sense in which Asim Roy uses the word) elements in society continued to exist. The main syncretic agents as delineated by Roy were what he terms the Bengal Muslim Cultural Mediators. In pre-modern/rural Bengal they were represented by personages like Sayyid Sultan, Daulat Wazir, Hayat Mahmud, Syed Hamza, Shaikh Chand, Muhammad Muqim and other late medieval *punthi* writers, *pirs*, and mystic *sufi bauls* like Lalon Shah. On the role of cultural mediators in history Asim Roy borrowed from Toynbee's concept of the 'Cultural broker' in the intelligentsia that emerges to resolve the problem of adapting to the rhythm of an exotic culture to which it has been forcibly or freely exposed.[36] The mediators belong to the intelligintsia (who are drawn from the ranks of the middle class in modern times), and are often in a marginal position vis-a-vis the rest of society. The ambivalent position of intelligentsia as mediators as being "in", but not "of" two societies also enables them to perform their critical role.[37]

In medieval Bengal the mediators had effected a rural mediation which Roy terms 'Islamic syncretism'. At the close of the nineteentth century, under the encroaching onslaught of the 'Wahabis' and 'Faraizis', the mediator's ground shrank perceptibly, but did not disappear altogether. They re-grouped to give syncretism a new formulation in the new age - in the cities and towns. These were the modern day Bengal Muslim Cultural Mediators. Following Asim Roy, we posit in our thesis that, in the transition from late nineteenth to twentieth centuries, a new band of mediators effected an

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[35]As illustrated in Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal.*

[36]Asim Roy, *The Islamic*, p.xii (preface) and p.71.

[37]See Edward Shils, *The Intellectual between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation*, (The Hague, 1961) and A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Bangladesh Tradition and Transformation*, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd, 1987), pp.24-67.

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urban syncretism which may be called **Bengalicization.** This was a rare moment in the history of Bengal, for it saw the shaping of half the inhabitants of the region into a powerful cultural and economic group. Modernization, a complex socio-economic process in itself, was con-comitant with a new cultural orientation of the Bengal *ashraf*, the dominant characteristic of which was a new form of indigenization. The traditional elite or pre-modern *ashraf*, now descended economically to meet an upwardly mobile *ajlaf* or *atraf* class and converged into the Muslim middle class, the *bhadro sampraday*, which now had of necessity, to express itself in a new cultural idiom. The most distinct outward emblem of the new idiom was of course the language. The tensions posed by these ideological challenges lay at the root of an identity crisis manifest most explicitly in the issue of language.

Hitherto the literate chose as their medium Urdu, Persian or Arabic, if they were high born, and the rural, *punthi's mishro-bhasha*, or dialects, if they were not. However there was also a rural/urban dimension to this dichotomy. *Punthi* as an art form was popular among some section of the rural elite also. Urdu-Perso-Arabic flourished at the numerous *makatbs* and *madrasas* - schools and seminaries which mainly flourished around urban centres. But the elite in town and country now saw the changed logic of a new socio-economic order and adopted Bengali as the language of 'genteel discourse.' The *punthi* tradition continued into the early decades of the present century and enjoyed popularity among many sections of the literate. This included the indigenized members of the landed aristocracy, for the *punthi* tradition was largely the work of an earlier band of cultural mediators.[38]

As the population experienced a greater degree of urban Bengalicization, classes, cultures and literary heritages merged to form new ones.

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[38]See Asim Roy, *The Islamic*, ch. 2

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Prosewriting in modern, chaste Bengali became more widespread. As one scholar puts it: "... some Muslims at the end of the century had begun to write in modern Sanskritized Bengali. Such writers were the products of the new educational system".[39] This notable change in the medium away from the *mishro-bhasa riti*, towards a 'purer' form of Bengali was one of the indicators of the great change that was taking place among the Muslim intelligentsia. This was the moment when the (problematic) identity of the Muslim as Bengali, middle class, was forged.

But several fine distinctions must be drawn here; urban Bengalicization was initially effected by a small group of syncretists, but soon it drew within its arc - the bulk of the middle class including those who had initially opposed the process.[40] Soon lines were drawn again as mentalities reformed, this time along dimensions of modern separatism and syncretism. The Bengal Muslim Cultural Mediators now re-emerged as a band of liberal thinkers who lived mostly in urban or semi-urban centres. Their ideals were best exemplified by the works of Mir Mosharraf Hossain, Ismail Hossain Shirazi (in their early phases), Abdul Hamid and Nausher Ali Khan Yusufzai, Kazi Imdadul Huq, Rokeya Sakhawat, Lutfur Rahman, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Abul Fazl, Abdul Kader, S. Wajed Ali, Abul Hussain, M. Akram Khan, Mahmuda Khatun, M. Nasiruddin, Kazi Motahar Hossain, Fazilatunnessa and others.

Cultural mediation (an implicit task of the liberals) was affecting a blend of modern Hindu and Islamic ideals and cultural components. The quintessence of this mediatory move was embodied in Wajed Ali's very topical essay '*Bangali Musulman*'. He tried to resolve the dilemma of identity

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[39] Sufia Ahmed, p.338

[40] i.e. those who had condemned or resisted the production of Bengali works of the 17th century *Punthi* writers and *pirs*. See Asim Roy, *The Islamic*, Chapters 2-4.

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that perplexed the Muslims by formulating the problematic and its solution:

> There is a problem of course that must be resolved as we declare proudly that we are Muslim. We have inherited the Islamic legacy, Hindus have developed another rich cultural stream. To a great extent, these two streams are mutually exclusive/contradictory. Selfish creatures have intensified the difference. How do we solve this?... The Muslim must contemplate Hindu culture and the Hindu must contemplate Muslim culture and cherish that which is precious and eternal in both... Through this fusion and erosion of distance alone can a true 'Bengali' identity — which is neither Hindu, Muslim, Indian or Punjabi — emerge.[41]

The two generations represented here had called the *bhadro sampraday* into existence. But the apparent leadership was not going to rest in their hands. As the situation blurred, the syncretic and separatist groups inter-penetrated with extremists at tail ends, and learned to coexist. The most die-hard proponent of separatist or alernately, fundamentalist beliefs, absorbed elements of the indigenizing process as evinced by the fundamentalist reformers' advocacy of Bengali - those who decried the use of Bengali as the language of the Muslims, now accepted its use.[42] The following lament by a contemporary in 1901 soon lost ground:

> ... they (Muslims) are not much interested in the Bengali or Sanskrit languages. On the contrary they show hatred, malice, indifference and ignorance regarding these.[43]

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[41] S. Wajed Ali, "Bengali Musulman", (Bengali), (Bengal Muslim), *Saogat*, 7:12, p.740, Shravan 1337 BS.

[42] For extracts from periodicals on the problematic of the Bengali language, see Mustafa Nurul Islam, pp. 311-415; Wakil Ahmed, *Unish Shotoke*, vol.II, pp.133-147; and Rashid al Faruki, *Muslim Manosh Sanghat O Pratikriya*, (Bengali), (The Muslim Mind Conflict and Reaction), (Dhaka: Baangla Academy, 1989).

[43] A. H. K. Yusufzai, *Udasi*, (Tangail: Khondker Bashiruddin Mia, 1901), cited in Sufia Ahmed, p.340.

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On the other hand, syncretizers themselves assumed separatist stands on many issues, e.g., the adoption of Pakistan as a homeland by many members of the liberal Muslim intelligentsia.

Thus was the problematic of the Bengali Muslim identity born and resolved simultaneously, as it was to be reborn and resolved time and again. This has led a recent scholar in her study on the Bengal Muslim intelligentsia to describe the situation as one of "a tension between the religious and the secular."[44]

The tensions which were thus generated within the Muslim community were resolved or *mediated* by a group of men and women who assumed new strategies and modes in different periods in history. At the start of the century most members of the Bengal Muslim intelligentsia were making conscious or subconscious choices with regard to their identity and affiliation as to whether, broadly speaking, they belonged to a syncretic or separatist reality. Two dimensions assumed importance here, the political and cultural. The separatist mode gained political hegemony (not divorced from the cultural) as evinced by the formation of the Muslim League and the birth of Pakistan. But the syncretic mode subsided to operate at a more subterranean but equally potent, cultural level (not divorced from the political).

The material and ideological world of women were bound by all these historical processes. It can be contended that many women were the modern day mediators as well as receptacles of the changes wrought. This is a fact that has surprisingly never been acknowledged so far in the region's historiography though many have waxed eloquent over the writings of individual women. For women were both the site and agents of

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[44] Tazeen Murshed, "*The Bengal Muslim Intelligentsia 1939-1977: The Tension between the Religious and the Secular,*" D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, Oxford, 1985, (unpublished).

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change. The task of fashioning a new identity had a close bearing upon the recasting of woman's place within the home and the community. But simultaneously, many of the women reviewed in this work were architects of the ideological and intellectual construction that was taking place, as well. Each political issue was linked to the Women's Question and assumed new significance there. The entire problematic, of whether the first modernized women of the Muslim Community were *bhadromohila* or not, is a case in point. If we think they were on the basis of historical evidence, there the matter rests. If not, then very convincing alternative terminology has to be established and the existence of the term till today has to be explained away.

It may be pertinent in this context to recall two episodes that will enrich the discussion at this point. The first was the case of the medium of instruction at Rokeya's school in Calcutta (1911) which was initiallly Urdu, (the language of the traditional elite). Rokeya herself lamented that she had not been able to open a Bengali section even after fourteen yeas of the school's existence. A few years later she was however, able to do so. Rokeya herself, of the landed aristrocracy, now declassed, had been brought up in an Urdu ambience as Faizunnessa too had been. But both women chose to conduct the important businesses of their life, as well as their creative endeavours, in Bengali. It is in this language, once almost forbidden them, that they left behind their signatures.

The second case was that of Azizunnessa who published in 1906 a Bengali translation of Archdeacon Parnell's *The Hermit*. She was married to a zamindar in Khulna and Merajuddin Ahmed, a member of the conservative Sudhakar group, was her mentor. In the dedication of her book addressed to her mentor Azizunessa wrote:

> ...it is because of your kindness that I have been able to learn a little Persian. You have asked me to translate The Hermit... Though

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> I have very little command over Bengali, I could not disobey you. I am not well acquainted with the English language, but thanks to your guidance I have been able to write the book.[45]

What is of equal interest is the comment made by Sufia Ahmed at this point, in her pioneering study of the Bengal Muslims:

> The whole episode... serves to bring into relief the great difficuties under which Muslims laboured. Here was a lady, presumably Urdu speaking, for whom Persian, Bengali and English were all in various degrees foreign languages... Her attainments were certainly unusual for a Muslim woman, and yet, if she was not merely very modest, in the end she was *not really at home* with the classical language of the Muslims, Persian, with the vigorous vernacular of her province, or with English. Her case history was one which could have been matched again and again.[46] (italics mine)

The question is, where then was Home for Bengali Muslims?

2. METHODOLOGY

The methods have been drawn from those used in pure historical research as well as other disciplines. As the purpose here was to recreate a period of socio-cultural history, a multi-disciplinary approach was deemed more appropriate. Primary documents comprised of contemporary periodicals and journals, non-fictional litrature and fictional literature, as well as religious texts and manuals in use at the time. Of these, the first, periodicals and journals have been used most extensively in this study. Archival matter (insitutional records and government documents) were another primary source, though dependence on them has not been preponderant. A source

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[45] A. Nisa, *Sanyasi*, (Bengali), (The Hermit), 1906, p.1., cited in Sufia Ahmed, p.338 .

[46] Sufia Ahmed, p.338.

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that was considered significant for this study was interviews or the recording of oral history as well as memoirs and private papers such as letters and diaries.

Sources

From the corpus of Muslim edited journals (or periodicals) that cropped up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only a representative selection was made, largely due to difficulties involved in procuring copies of older journals and the time factor. For example, we could consult a few copies of *Mihir O' Shudhakor* and *Islam Pracharak* only. The periodicals, usually styled "literary or social monthlies" (*Sahitya O Samaj Bishayak Patrika*), were rich in discursive material and have been used for the deliberations on issues that related to two of the institutions studied here: family and education. These institutions have been studied at two levels, namely, the main historical events or structural changes and the ideologies underlying these. As regards the latter, Clare Burton has pointed out:

> The ideological realm is the locus of some of the most important of mechanisms by which the social relations, including gender relations of non-capitalist and capitalist social formations are reproduced and changed.[47]

Periodicals still remain an untapped source for the women's history of the period.[48] However, as the present work is a study in cultural history, reliance on daily or weekly 'newspapers', which were more concerned with bare events than the cultural impetus behind them, has been eschewed. Except for a few special cases, all daily and weekly newspapers (two

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[47]Clare Burton, *Subordination, Feminism and Social Change*, (Hong Kong, 1985), p.32.

[48]Anisuzzaman and Mustafa Nurul Islam have written the two best known works on Muslim edited journals so far.

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renowned Muslim-edited newspapers of the period were *The Mussulman* and *The Moslem Chronicle*) were not included in the sources. Many of the periodicals consulted here contained numerous creative writings of the period; some of these were also published later in book form. They were consulted for the chapters on the third substantive focus of this work: growth of creativity (besides family and education). The periodicals (all in Bengali) consulted extensively for this purpose were: *Al Eslam* (1915), *Islam Darshan* (1916), *Nabanur* (1903), *Mohammadi* (1903), *Masik Mohammadi* (1927), *Sadhona* (1919), *Saogat* (1918), *Dhumketu* (1922) and *Shikha* (1925).[49] A few relevent issues of *Bulbul* were also consulted. The various opinions, ideas and debates aired in the popular press were helpful in reconstructing the period ideologically.

A very notable literary journal of the period was the *Bangiyo Muslim Sahitya Patrika* (1918-1923), published from and preserved in Calcutta. However, apart from a few writings by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein and two other Muslim *bhadromahila*, this journal was not found to be particularly resourceful for the present work. Moreover, women's issues, though a concern, was not a major one in this *Patrika*.

The semi-religious semi-behavioural manuals which were very popular in the period under review have not been analyzed before in any historical study on women. In the present thesis, such manuals have been extensively consulted and found to be a veritable source of information. They include: Abdul Kader Jilani, *Guniyat ut Talebeen* (Bengali trans. n.d.); Ashraf Ali Thanawi, *Beheshti Zewar* (published in 1905, translated into Bengali in 1961); Nasiruddin Ahmed, *Pati-bhakti* (1926); Mohammad Ghiyasuddin, *Taujihul Adab* (1924); Ghulam Rahman, *Moqsudul Momenin* (1932) and Prof.

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[49]The year of first publication is shown within the parenteses. Full detatils of these journals are given in the Bibliography cited at the end of this dissertation.

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Sanaulla, *Adarsha Balika* (1937). A lot of the non-fictional literature of the period were published in contemporary journals. A few were published, afterward or before, independently as tracts (e.g. Shirazi's *Stree Shiksha*).

For the last two substantive chapters of this thesis, which trace the development of creativity among women and the portrayal of the new woman in literature, we have used some of the major fictional works published at the time. It is hoped that along with the more conventional historical sources outlined above, they will uncover aspects of the period which otherwise remained hidden.

As mentioned above, this being an exercise in cultural history, reliance on 'solid' and 'ultra conventional' historical sources such as government censuses, reports and reviews on education, gazetteers, secretarial records and official proceedings, has been of subsidiary importance. Our position here is quite similar to Borthwick's deliberation on this issue: "Conventional historical sources, concerned with public life, are of only marginal use in research in this uncharted area."[50]

The *bhadromohila*'s own voice is very important for this kind of work. The significance of personal narrative in history is receiving greater attention every day. Of late, a sizable crop of texts on women and their writings have been published. All efforts are being made to compile women's narratives, memoirs and autobiographical works.[51] Access to these voices occured through two channels: memoirs and interviews. The Muslim *bhadromohila* was not as profilic here as her Brahmo/Hindu counterpart. In this work, we have used as many memoirs or

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[50]Meredith Borthwick, preface, p.xi.

[51]See, for example, Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) and Suzie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds), *Women Writing in India 6000 B.C. to the Present*, Vol.I, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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autoboigraphical works as could be located. Through interviews it was often possible to travel to times long passed and reconstruct lives of prior generations.

Period of the Study

A word is needed about the dates chosen to mark the begining and end of the present study. One could easily start with 1873, the year in which Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani established her school for girls. Instead, we have chosen to start with a date which marked the publication of a book by the same lady to emphasize the varying dimensions of this study, which is an attempt to reconstruct both events and mentalities. In 1876 Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani's *Rupjalal*, the first full length book by a Muslim woman in Bengal, was published from Dhaka. It was incidentally also the year in which Swarnakumari Devi, the first female Bengali novelist, published her work *Dipnirban* from Calcutta.[52]

Faizunnessa was not only the first to publish a full-length work, but also a pioneer of women's education. In 1939, the date chosen to close the present study, 'The Lady Brabourne College' of Calcutta was founded mainly — but not exclusively — for Muslim girls, and at a more subtle level manifest the Muslim community's clamour for separate government sponsored opportunities. This gave institutional form to the struggle for women's educational rights. So we have started with a book and ended with the establishment of a college to trace in the temporal arc of the title, the sweeping and diverse nature of the curve. The two dates symbolize the start of creativity and self-expression among the *bhadromohila*, and a realization of their educational aspirations.

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[52]Some regard Hannah Catherine Mullens as the first female novelist for her book "Phulmani O Karunar Bibaran" published in 1852, though it was more a didactic and proselytizing work than a novel.

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Spatial Extent of the Study

Two urban centres have been selected as the main spatial contexts in which the *bhadromohila's* lives may be studied - Calcutta and Dhaka. Calcutta was the great metropolis, the political and professional, the cultural and educational centre of the region. It was in the vanguard of social, cultural and political movements. S.N. Mukherjee in describing the demography of nineteenth century Calcutta points out that "the bulk of the population were Bengali Hindus [and] Bengali Muslims formed the second largest community in Calcutta."[53] The total Bengali Muslim population comprised about a little less than half the total Bengali Hindu. Mukherjee also points out that the majority of the leading Muslims were non-Bengali, i.e., the Persianized *ashraf* category discussed above. In 1911, according to the census of India, two-thirds of the population of Calcutta comprised of Hindu and one-fourth comprised of Muslim. Other communities (the Buddhist, Ismailia, Parsee, Christian, Anglo-Indian, etc.), though a fraction of its population, also found a comfortable niche in its cosmopolitan lifestyle. The new intelligentsia of nineteenth century Bengal has been called Calcutta-centred, and justifiably so.

But the middle class also lived in substantial numbers in the *mofussil* towns, the various divisional and sub-divitional headquarters. According to the census of India (1921), besides Calcutta and its suburbs, the only other urban centre which deserved the appellation "city" was Dacca (now Dhaka), located in the eastern part of Bengal. In 1917 it had two first grade colleges, a teacher's training school, a medical school, an engineering school and seven High English schools.The best seminary for traditional Muslim education of Bengal province was the Dhaka Madrassa.

According to the 1901 census report, 48.8% Hindu males and 8.2% Hindu

[53]Mukherjee, "Caste, etc.", p.7.

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females were literate in Dhaka city. The overall Muslim literacy was 18.3%. In the same year, in the district of Dhaka, 2778 persons were engaged in teaching, 285 in clerical services, 280 in the legal profession, and 168 in the medical profession. A large proportion of these people must have lived in Dhaka city and this points to the growth of the educated middle class here. As a class, the landed gentry was not as influential as in the case of Calcutta. Thus the educated, professional middle class could take the lead in the various reform movements in Dhaka.

Dhaka was the cultural metropolis of East Bengal. Though traffic between Calcutta, Dhaka, and other mofussil towns was frequent, East Bengal had its own particular regional flavour. Much happened outside these two cities — in smaller towns like Rajshahi, Barisal, Jessore, Chittagong, Sylhet, Bankura, Hooghly and Serampore — but constraints of space and time did not allow me to incorporate them. Calcutta and Dhaka were selected as the two most urbanized centres relevant to the main theme of this study.

Other Boundaries

The areas of employment and politics have not been touched upon in this study. Till after the 1940s economic participation was not a reality for the *bhadromohila*, though a very few of them took up a profession. (Lower and working class women, then as throughout history, have worked outside the home, but this was not true of women of the middle class, who comprise the focus of this study). Education was itself an end and not a means to gainful employment in the period under review. However, by 1939, one could safely speculate, women were certainly poised on the brink of some measure of economic independence.

Political participation was not as great as among women of other communities. There was sporadic participation in the *Swadeshi*, Non-Coope-

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ration and Civil Disobedience or Muslim separatist movements, but participation never reached a significant scale. However, there was a great amount of intellectual deliberation on issues that were social and political e.g. the problem of Bengali Muslim identity, the language issue, Pan-Indianism, secularism and separatism. This points to future research.

Religion was an all pervasive part of daily life, and I have not dealt with it separately. But religion, religiosity, ritual, etc., could if desired be extricated from other issues and studied in isolation as a factor on women's lives. The economic aspects of women's lives (its influnce on them and vice versa) have also not been studied separately. I have touched on them so long as they pertained to the familial, educational and literary roles of women. Constraints of time also set definite boundaries to the research. But religion, employment and politics could well comprise subject matter for another study.

3. CHAPTERIZATION

The first chapter provides the context of change - the historical, social, economic and ideological impetus behind the women's reform movement in colonial Bengal. In later chapters, the world of Muslim women has been studied in three domains of activity - the family, education and literature.

The institution of the family was the arena where the major part of a woman's life - traditional or reformed - was spent. As a social unit the institution assumed special significance in a colonized society anxious for self assertion. It was at once a repository of the timeless and traditional and a ripe area for change. Chapter II focusses on the traditional family structures. In Chapter III we look into the changes and adjustments characterizing the family in transition.

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Education was the great mediator between the private and public spheres, between the home and the world. Along with reform in the structure of the family, women's access to education, were the major concerns of the reformers. Education was perceived to be a panacea for all social ills. It was through education that women first came into the public gaze and around this issue that they became vocal about their condition and rights. Chapter IV traces the growth of formal learning from the first tentative schools to a full fledged college. The discourses on education aired in the popular press were immensly rich and varied. It was the issue most deliberated upon. In Chapter V we attempt to analyze the major features in the discursive material related to the ideas on female education of the period.

Literature was the medium through which the women discussed here first expressed themselves. Their literary activity left behind a record for posterity and was also an assertion of their agency in those times. Moreover, literature was an important aspect of the Bengal renaissance and it is of no small significance that women participated in the production of creative cultural forms in this period. Chapter VI summarizes the development and expressions of literary activity among Muslim women during the period of the present study (from the late 19th century to the 1930s). Chapter VII focusses on the portrayal of the New Woman in various literary works. Finally, in Chapter VIII we conclude our discussions.

A few words are in order about the formulation of the chapters, specially determining their cut-off points. This was undoubtedly a difficult task for a project like the present one. For instance, in discussing the traditinoal family, the terms *ghar* and *bahir* were elaborated. The moment one stepped into the *andarmahal*, one took along the outside. One could comprehend the *ghar* only with reference to the *bahir*. Then the theme of prostitution — where did it belong? In the public domain of 'work'? Was that all? Or was

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it an ulimate *bahir*, a mirror image of the *andar*, constituted by residual but powerful elements of it? No doubt, categories seemed to slip out and absorb each other.

Purdah was another elusive category in the present sudy. It was simultaneously a concept that had accumulated an ideology around it, a practice, and a physical curtain. It pervaded all institutions in society - family, education, politics, work, religion, culture. Described by some as an institution by itself, *purdah* could certainly merit a separate chapter. However, given the level of analysis of the present work, it could not be separated from other institutions and studied in isolation. So it had to be woven in.

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CHAPTER I
REFORM MOVEMENT IN A COLONIZED SOCIETY

Tradition and Modernity

The emergence of a new female personality in colonial Bengal was an important episode in the social and cultural history of this region and a significant development in South Asian gender relations. The present work focuses on the transition made by women of the emergent Muslim middle class in Bengal from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries and the forging of the new personality of the modern gentlewoman or the Muslim *bhadromohila*. The transition was effected through a process of social change often referred to as modernization as contrasted with tradition. Much ink has been spilled over the terminology and modernization theory itself comprises a many-faceted discourse.

For 'modernity' and 'tradition' are concepts which, despite the uncertainty of the constructed duality, have pressed themselves insistently upon historians of colonial Bengal. Sumit Sarkar, for instance, writes:

> Another important but neglected theme is the ideological conflict between modernism and traditionalism — between an attitude which broadly speaking demands social reform, tries to calculate things and ideas by the criteria of reason and present day utility,... and a logically opposite trend which defends and justifies existing social mores in the name of immemorial tradition and the glorious past...[1]

Most historians — including Sarkar — are, however, aware of the dangers

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[1]Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: Peoples' Publishing House, 1973), p.34.

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of a mechanical separation of distinct trends and advocate its use as an abstract model for analytic convenience. The problem arises out of the interpenetration of 'modernity' and 'tradition' in the process of real historical change, and its complexity when the focus is on a phenomenon such as the changing world of Bengali, Muslim women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One model of change for instance, promoted by the orthodox/neo-conservative school, took as its premise the ideal and pure condition of women under what was perceived as a pristine and uni-dimensional Islam and Scriptural authority. Yet the model enjoined a certain 're-forming' in its insistence on order and method in the new kind of Muslim household. On the other hand, even the most radical proponents of a rational and humanistic reconstruction of gender relations within the Muslim community took care to cite scriptural authority as they interpreted it, in their model of reconstruction. In that changing world, the incipient rational, humanist concepts and the impulse for neo-conservative reform existed cheek by jowl.

Ghulam Murshid, in his seminal work *The Reluctant Debutante*, accepts and uses the term, with due regard to the debate on it. Following social scientists studying culture, he has taken the term to mean growth of new knowledge and its application in service of human society, self reliance and achievement orientation, development of science, technology and creativity, of public opinion and secular interests, and an inclination to measure the world and believe it can be measured, etc. To Murshid, the women he studied displayed many of these characteristics.[2]

Meredith Borthwick, whose work followed Murshid's and dealt with the same subject within the same time frame, has not dwelt at length on the subject of modernization. She has used the term "process of social change

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[2]Ghulam Murshid, *The Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization 1849-1905*, (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, 1983), pp.13-14

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under colonial rule" instead.[3] We have used the term (along with some others) as 'given' or boundary concepts which frame my study and are end-products of other researches which therefore fall beyond the scope of this work.

When speaking of reformism in Bengal, the liberal movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which wanted to change society along modified western lines, are usually indicated. But what is generally ignored is the fact that a neo-conservative movement gained momentum which was also 'reformist' in nature, though perhaps in a retrogressive sense. In Bengal, the latter was closely allied to the wave of fundamentalist activity which swept over the region at the time. The 'unreconstructed' *sharif* culture against which reform, orthodox or liberal, was directed, was in many ways a more tolerant, heterogenous and open-minded culture finding expression in the poetry of persons like Lalon Shah and Mirza Ghalib.

The neo-conservative discourse tried to accommodate the changing environment of the nineteenth century by re-instituting a strengthened and purified patriarchal order. But it differed from the liberal project in that the latter was more eclectic. Where the traditional orthodox or fundamentalist groups would eschew Ghalib's sensual poetry and Lalon's syncretic lyrics (the conservative reformers at Deoband proscribed Ghalib's poetry; those in Bengal condemned Lalon's songs and social message), the liberal camp accommodated these forms after some modifications. This was best exemplified in *bhadrolok* appropriation of Lalon Shah's works. The coded philosophy of the Lalon cult was shorn off its true power and domesticated to suit the parlour culture of the new elite thereby transmuting an unusual philosophy for living into middle class spirituality. This most succinctly illustrated the capacity as well as the limits of the modernity

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[3]Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849 - 1905*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.xi.

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preached by Bengal's liberal *bhadro* culture. It created more space for men and women and forfeited some.

These are the complexities that must be borne in mind when speaking of the 'modern' and the 'traditional'. From this angle it would be more fitting to talk of social change rather than modernization. But perhaps the most cogent reason for the latter's usage may be found in the records left behind by the men and women who inhabited those times. Many of them thought of themselves as 'modern', or on the brink of modernity. They thought they were leaving behind a traditional and narrow world for a more free and glorious one.

Context of the Reform Movement

The women's question in the latter half of the nineteenth century had to be formulated in a society where the process of modernization was subverted by colonization which had disrupted the political, economic and cultural reality of India. The change had occurred earliest in Bengal which was the first foothold of the British. Changes introduced in the economic infrastructure through the introduction of land ownership, commercial agriculture and new forms of business enterprises, were accompanied by transformation of the legal and educational systems, and a dislocation of cultural patterns. The traditional sources of wealth, power, and prestige for the Muslim gentry had been land, and the administrative, judicial and educational services. British economic and administrative policies started by Warren Hastings and consolidated by Cornwallis displaced the gentry from their traditional sources of wealth and status as their very presence had divested them of political power.

By 1790 the legal system had been reformed, though selectively. English law replaced indigenous religious and customary law in criminal cases, but

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family law (hence gender relations) were left untouched. The reforms introduced by Cornwallis in the judiciary further eroded the bases of Muslim power by greatly reducing the number of *Vakils* or law officers from a majority to a mere 25%. Militarily, the Muslims had already been adversely affected by employment of Hindu soldiers in the Company's army.[4]

The Permanent Settlement of 1793 and the Resumption Laws of 1828 struck at the economic and educational bases of the community.[5] The wealth, prestige and culture of the Bengal *ashraf* waned till a new gentry from the emergent middle class effected a social and cultural regeneration which once more empowered them.

Toward the later part of the nineteenth century the relatively backward Muslim community was gradually brought into the mainstream of modernization through a programme of social, educational and cultural reform. The reform movements were undertaken initially by members of the *ashraf* (intelligentsia), men such as Nawab Abdul Lateef, Syed Ameer Ali, Mirza Delwar Hussain, Maulvi Abdul Hamid and members of illustrious families such as the nawabs of Shaistabad (Bakerganj), the Chaudhuris of Dhanbari, the Ghaznavis of Delduar (Tangail), the Chaudhuris of Paschimgaon, the Pannis of Karatia, the Dhaka nawabs etc., who were influenced by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and his reformist project at Aligarh.

The former were men of the more or less Persianized elite who resided in urban centres such as Calcutta, Dhaka, Murshidabad and Hughly. The

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[4]See S. N. Mukherjee, "Caste, Class etc.", in *Calcutta*, pp.8-10.

[5]However, recent scholars are of the opinion that the Permanent Settlement did not result in as radical and widespread a change of land ownership as believed. With regard to the Muslims in Bengal, at the top level, the ratio of Hindu to Muslim landowners, was not radically altered. See Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society 1760 - 1850*, (N. Delhi: Manohar, 1977) and Sirajul Islam, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal: A Study of its Operation 1790-1819*, (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1978).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

latter represented the Urdu-Bengali speaking mofussil gentry whose life-styles were modelled on the first category.[6] Beneath these two layers stood the lesser *ashraf* which included "the Syeds, Khondkers, and all such persons as could lay claim to foreign ancestry and had some property and wealth to back up their claims."[7]

But reformist mentality was in no way confined to this elite alone whose traditional sources of power were drying up. (Abdul Lateef had lamented that many Muslims in government employ or the professions were "the wreck of noble and affluent families"). Expansion of the jute industry and the modest wealth accumulated through other trades had created a small middle-class which was upwardly mobile in lifestyle and aspiration. These families were anxious that their sons received an English or at least secular education and enlisted in the professions opened up after the advent of the British.[8] Many of the new generation thus produced were neither high Mughal officials or zamindars - the various Chaudhuries, Mirzas, Shaikhs, Talukdars, Bhuiyans of the older aristocracy, nor the low status groups such as the *julaha, nikari, nilgar, kalu, dhuniya, hajjam,* etc., mentioned by James Wise in his classification of Muslim society.[9] Thus, in social origin the new middle class which was going to play such an important part in the reformation of Muslim society from the last two

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[6]See Rafiuddin Ahmed for these distinctions, pp.13-16.

[7]Rafiuddin Ahmed, p.15

[8]A middle income group consisting of intermediate land holders partly created after the Permanent Settlement, and a few government servants and other professionals did exist but their number was very small. For the Muslim middle class, see M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims,* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967). Also see the works of Sufia Ahmed, Abdul Moudud, and Rafiuddin Ahmed.

[9]James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal,* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1883), p.34.

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decades of the nineteenth century onwards, came from the intermediate ranks of landowners, and administrative, educational and judicial service-holders, and businessmen augmented no doubt, by the hitherto lower strata of the *ajlaf* and some members of the pre-modern elite. Various local reform initiatives undertaken by this group (such as the Musulman Suhrid Sammiloni in Dhaka) gave a wider base to the reform movement. Many of them joined government service, sometimes at the lower rungs. This new salariat was the first to set the winds of change in motion. They were the first to question existing values and institutions, to embark upon social reform and turn to the condition of women. It was from these families that the first daughters, wives and sisters, went to school and stepped outside the *andarmahal.*[10] The economic linkages between women's reform and the rise of the Muslim middle class were similar to those in the Brahmo/Hindu community.[11] The professional gentry were drawn into new arrangements which called for changed social relations within the family and outside.

The other forces which compelled the gaze of reformers inward to the domain of women were not directly visible. Though linked with the economic processes outlined above, they were not economic in nature, but cultural and ideological. One of the salient factors here was the matter of 'colonial shame' inflicted by the colonizer on subject races. The bulk of colonial writing on India focussed on demonstrating the barbaric nature of her civilization. Chief among these writers were Mill, Duff, Macaulay and Grant

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[10]Borne out by my interviews. Most women interviewed had fathers, sometimes grandfathers, and husbands, who were in government employ. However, tenuous connections with land still existed as many had small land holdings in the ancestral village, apart from a government job. This closely resembled Mukherjee's description of the Hindu middle-class or *bhadrolok* category in his study on nineteenth century Calcutta. (See Introduction)

[11]See Borthwick, p.26-59.

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- who laid down the physical and moral inferiority of the Indian race as they perceived it, motivated no doubt by their colonial interests. A domain in which this inferiority was evident they pointed, was the degraded position of Indian women. Central to the criteria by which James Mill judged the level of a civilization was the position it accorded its women. A denigrating onslaught on the culture and history of the colonized was a strategy of the colonizing powers in other regions of the world as well. While pointing to the colonial occupation of Muslim countries in West Asia where the colonizers used all available means to persuade the subject races of their inferiority and the barbarism of their culture as manifest in their women's oppressed condition, Mernissi observes: "Muslims were dismissed as promiscuous and many crocodile tears were shed over the terrible fate of Muslim women."[12]

Faced with this more subtle cultural attack, a section of the local population reacted by defending positions anachronistic even by their own standards (like polygamy). When the colonial power took over a self-righteous and paternalistic defence of women's lot, any proposed change in the latter's condition was therefore seen by nationalist groups as concessions to the foreign power. Nineteenth and twentieth century reformers in India were plagued by this dilemma, caught between reform and restoration of national dignity. Many became unwilling to negotiate with the colonial power on the women question.[13]

Indians interested in modernization reacted to the scrutiny of their civilization in the colonial period of their history, in two ways. One group

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[12]Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), p.7.

[13]Vividly set down by Partha Chaterjee in "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), pp.233-253.

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rejected much of tradition and the past, and believed that an all out emancipation of women along western lines was the only answer. Another group circumvented the colonial shame not by a rejection, but a glorification of the *past reinterpreted.* This reconstruction of the past synthetically absorbed much of the present and grafted it on to a 'golden age'. Both Hindus and Muslims had one. In both, women enjoyed high status in the same proportion as they suffered a degraded one in the contemporary age.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century the Brahmo/Hindu reformists in Bengal, being engaged with their romantic reconstruction of the Aryan past, devoted much time to the creation of an ideal Indian womanhood which continued well into the twentieth century. In the period of cultural nationalism, R. C. Dutt, Bankim and Dayananda, among others, were the architects of the new ideal womanhood in India/Bengal. Sita, Savitri and Sati were invoked from the Epic Age. Along with Durga and Kali they were given reincarnations in nationalist terms. They were empowered with two critical functions in mind - to give the militant call of the *Deshmatrika* against an oppressive colonial regime, and to preserve the sanctity of home.[14]

A similar reconstruction took place in the Muslim Reform Movement, but here the Aryan goddess and heroine were replaced by an ideal woman, a modern day Ayesha or Fatima. (Female warriors of antiquity like Khaola were sometimes celebrated, but they never became household words.) The first wave of anti-traditional reformism of the early period in Bengal thus made way for a reassertion of national dignity on part of the colonized. The dominant ideology in the late nineteenth century which framed lesser ideologies was that of anti-colonial nationalism for Hindus, and an identity

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[14]See Jashodhara Bagchi, "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Oct. 20-27, 1990

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seeking modernism for Muslims. The Women's Question was formulated within these wider ideological frameworks.

Whatever their various reconstructions and positions, the reformists acknowledged the present degraded status of women and felt it was imperative to improve it through a social reform movement aided wherever possible by the government which had also committed itself to the cause.

The struggle of the emergent Bengali elite was on many fronts. Outside, in the political (and economic) domain it was against the British. Yet at the same time the transformation of the colonial society into a modern nation state had resulted from an encounter with the culture and polity of the colonists. This had provided the background impetus to what came to be regarded as the Women's Reform Movement(s) which compelled the reformist gaze to turn to the inner space of the middle class home.[15]

The aspiring elite had to validate their claim to modernity (rational-utilitarian-liberalism), and at the same time establish the dignity of their own past tradition. Women had to be both the proof of the community's modernity and its fortress against the denigrating onslaught of that very modernity, which if not countered would obliterate the Indian's cultural existence. Apart from this, struggles had to be waged on other fronts. For while the nationalists and modernizers countered colonial dominance, they sought to establish their own dominance over the home and its keepers, i.e. women. This has led many recent scholars re- evaluating the history of nineteenth century india, to posit that the women's reform movement "legitimized" the subjection of women under a "new patriarchy."[16] In the case of Muslims too, the modernizing ideology of their Awakening sought to first create the new woman and then legitimize her subjection.

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[15]See Partha Chaterjee, "The Nationalist...", in Sangari and Vaid.

[16]Partha Chatterjee, ibid. p. 248.

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These contrary pulls gave unique twists and turns to the progression of the women's reform movement, dislodging it from a linear route. On the one hand, there was an over-riding desire to reform; on the other, to uphold tradition. Resolutions were sought at every turn. Tradition had to give way or be recreated and invented. Reform had to adjust to existing models.

The situation of the Bengal Muslims was even more complex. To the reformers of Muslim Bengal, not only were the denizens of the *andarmahal* a source of shame, they had to prove themselves doubly - once to the colonial overlord, and again to the more advanced Hindu community. This is evinced from contemporary writings and social novels. For instance, in 1932, *Masik Mohammadi* published a piece where the writer attacked a section of the 'misguided' Muslim youth, the Bangiya Parishilan Samiti, for organizing and advertising a dance show in Calcutta (where "Muslim girls were going to engage in the purdah-violating act of dancing"). According to him, such senseless acts of imitation sprang from an inferiority complex:

> A deep-rooted inferiority complex [sic] lies behind this misdeed. Due to their economic backwardness, and century old negative propaganda of colonial publicists, Muslims in this region have started to look down on themselves. They look at the advanced Hindu community and desire to rise to their level of achievement and progress. And they look at Europe and try to aspire to its ways and appear *civilized* [sic].[17]

The debased condition of women was not just a source of shame, it was seen to be a burden as well, for the modernizers. But apart from being the outer emblem of civilization, and an aid to the everyday living of the men of the new professional class, the amelioration of women was also a crucial

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[17] "Nacher Majlis," *Masik Mohammadi*, 5:12, 875, Ashwin 1339 BS.

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strategic and psychic need. For, one of the prime objectives of the reformers now became to 'sanctify the home' as expressed by the first item in the list of specific aims in the first issue of Rashid al Khairi's Urdu journal for women *Ismat* (which means chastity, honour and modesty in Urdu) published from Delhi in 1908 — "Haram ki harmat qaim rakhna" — or as the English saying goes, "To make the home a castle".

Displaced from the public sphere by the colonial regime, the Indian polity had to look to the other realm for its empowerment — the private sphere. But whatever angle one viewed it from, the liberal or orthodox, the unreformed Hindu or Muslim home appeared either a disgraceful, medieval anachronism, or not pristine Hindu/Islamic enough. As one scholar studying nineteenth century Muslim women's reform observes:

> ...the 'private' had come to be seen by the *shurafa* as a sort of fortress Islam in a sea of hostility...its old pagan image of denizens (now) came to present a formidable problem.[18]

The threat could be neutralized by reforming women into the "new sharif polity" through a liberal or orthodox programme of education and Islamization. Minault reiterates this when she says:

> The home was to become a 'sanctuary' (the double meaning of the word *haram* is significant) - progress and enlightenment were to be brought to women.[19]

Both orthodox reformers of the Deoband type and liberal brands of the Aligarh brand, adhered to this belief (see Chap.7 for a full discussion of

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[18]Faisal F. Devji, "The Movement for Women's Reform in Muslim India 1857-1900", seminar paper (unpublished), Chicago University, 1990.

[19]Gail Minault, "*Ismat*: Rashid ul Khairi's novels and Urdu literary journalism for women", in Christopher Shackle (ed), *Urdu and Muslim South Asia*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.133.

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various discourses).

A similar phenomenon had earlier occurred in the Brahmo/Hindu community. In an analytical study, Chaterjee has shown how the *bhadro* elite, displaced from the public realm had turned to the inner sphere, the home, and refused to make its denizens (women) a matter of negotiation and exchange with the colonial power[20]. It was an uneasy resolution, where women hung in the balance of colonial negotiation. But it also illustrates the centrality of the home in the reformation scheme and its significance in the making of the new polity. What is more, something similar had also happened in Victorian England in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Historians of Victorian society have accounted for the period's idealization of woman (in the form of the *Perfect Lady*) by examining the country's religious and economic upheavals. Religious doubt and the competitive atmosphere of capitalist business combined to threaten the stability of many traditional values (this was the era of Charles Darwin and the Utilitarians). One writer observes:

> Experiencing at once the breakdown of faith and the dehumanizing pressure of the marketplace, many Victorian writers relocated those values in the home and in the woman who was its centre. It was she who could create a *sanctuary* both from the anxieties of modern life and for those values no longer confirmed by religious faith or relevant to modern business.[21] (italics mine)

In the Indian context this would read — the breakdown of old values in the

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[20]Partha Chatterjee, in Sangari and Vaid; and *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986)

[21]Carol Christ, "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House", in Martha Vicinus (ed) *A Widening Sphere Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p.146.

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face of modernization and the dehumanizing effects of colonization — and the pressures of negotiation that were taking place between the colonizer and the colonized.

So broadly speaking, wherever one located reform — in Victorian England or colonial India — the home was to be refashioned into a sanctuary and its demarcation from the world sharpened. But the process which was set in motion contained an equally strong pull in the other direction. Just as the difference was made more distinct it was also reduced as women stepped out to assume new roles in the public domain.

As public space shrank for the Indians till there was no sovereignty left (the vestige of de jure sovereignty had been ostensibly taken away from the last Mughal emperor in 1857) the home became the centre of attention. By this time the colonial power too had finished its territorial conquests and entered a phase of cultural and administrative expansion. From the Raj's point of view the Women's Question was an important part of a policy of acculturation for its own purpose of ultimately creating a class "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinion and morals" though many British policy makers must have earnestly believed the issue was a matter of pure altruism only. From the Indian's point of view the home and its custodians was to comprise a sanctuary in troubled times. It was to be an aid in modern middle class lifestyle, and a source both of nationalist regeneration and modernist change. The *andarmahal* had to withstand the full glare of outside scrutiny.

Behind every girl's school set up, behind every debate on child marriage or polygamy, there were a complex set of factors — economic, imperial, political or ideological — at work. The economic, judicial and administrative reorganization of the colonial world — and the ideological exigencies of the day — provided the context for reform.

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CHAPTER II
THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY

The family — the central arena of the private sphere peopled by denizens who were not supposed to be seen, let alone participate in the world outside — was a natural consequence of the gender inequality inherent in a patriarchal scheme of things. This was also the only domain where women — rich or poor — derived any significance and meaning from their lives and its structure was a key element in maintaining prescribed gender relations. In the present chapter we will discuss some of the important details of this complex that shaped the 'world' of Muslim women within the boundaries of traditional *sharif* families in Bengal.

Structure of the Traditional Family

Dwelling on the lives of Hindu women in the early decades of this century, Margaret Urquhart painted a picture of Indian patriarchy in her book *Women of Bengal.*[1] Though it depicted the lives of women inside the domain of Hindu families, many of her observations would apply to women in general. She observed that the family, which served as the social unit in India rather than the individual, comprised of not just one couple and their offspring but "a patriarchal group in its main stream and branches". According to Urquart, the English family did not closely resemble the Roman 'familia' but the Indian household of the time was an almost exact parallel to the ancient institution. In such large patriarchal set-ups the control and regulation of an entire system required a hierarchical structure with authority vested in the person at the apex. As such these 'joint'

[1]Margaret Urquhart, *Women of Bengal: A Study of the Pardanasin of Calcutta*, (London: 1925; rep. New Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1983)

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

or 'extended' families traditionally found in both Hindu and Muslim communities had a well defined set of roles and relationships based on authority and obedience. Though the ultimate head was understandably the male patriarch, in matters of daily administration of the household, the mother or wife of the patriarch (most powerful bread-winner) would be in charge.

Urquhart provided an economic explanation for the existence of the joint family and its gradual disappearance. In a society where land was the major source of wealth, it was deemed easier to maintain standard, status and prosperity if all the sons "lived by means of a common purse". Both Hindus and Muslims had laws of inheritance whereby all the sons got an equal share of the inheritance, and it was this, Urquhart suggested, that cemented the structure of the *paribar* (family). But as the traditional sources of wealth and sustenance started to dry up with the changes attendant on colonial rule, the traditional family in both Hindu and Muslim communities underwent great structural changes.

Patriarchy and the Muslim Family

Theoretically, Islam affirmed the potential equality of the sexes,[2] so the roots of gender inequality in Muslim society had to be sought elsewhere:

> The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely segregation and legal subordination in the family.[3]

The new social order created by the emergence of Islam in the seventh century - a patriarchal, monotheistic state out of warring, polytheistic, and often matrilineal tribes - could exist only if the tribe gave way to the

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[2]See Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. [illegible]

[3] Mernissi, ibid. p. 19

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Umma (Muslim polity and brotherhood). Prophet Muhammad realized that the tightly controlled patriarchal family was necessary for the preservation of the *Umma*. With patriliny came the importance of private property and the possession of family members (wives and children) and biological paternity of the child and, therefore, control of female sexuality.[4] One of the many devices the Prophet used to implement the *Umma* (or social order) was the creation of the institution of the Muslim family, which was quite unlike any existing sexual union. Its distinguishing feature "was its strictly defined monolithic structure".[5] This institution with its emphasis on segregation and subordination of women had a crucial role in the maintenance of the Islamic patriarchal order.

The great strength of the Islamic code was that it was capable of preserving its essence, long after the social revolution of the 7th century, in the face of countless epochs and various cultural reincarnations. The institution of the family in northern and eastern India where Islam had recreated the Muslim polity — far from its temporal and geographic origin — fitted in quite well with the existing patriarchal structure.

THE *ANDARMAHAL*

In nineteenth century Bengal, the separation of the private and public spheres among respectable Muslim families was spatially manifest in the division of the place of residence into an inner part (*andar*) and an outer one. This separation was physically more well-defined in the houses of the

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[4]A patrimonial system is one in which the man has power and authority over the woman and the children before puberty, and the household. One of Mernissi's arguments is that in pre-Islamic society there were several matrilineal tribes with a wide variety of marriages and women's rights. In this light the thesis that women's position in *Jahilya* was uniformly deplorable needs to be reexamined.

[5]Mernissi, p.18.

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well-to-do *sharif* (well-born, upper class gentry) families where the female members hardly ever ventured out of the *andarmahal* (inner mansion). In the houses of the less well-to-do, the inner and outer quarters would often be symbolically separated by a thin wall, fence, curtain, or sometimes even by a piece of furniture. The most important point behind all this was that the seclusion of women and privacy of family life was maintained in some manner or other. Since this 'separation', apart from its functional use, was also the insignia of respectability, only the families lower down in the social scale could probably ignore its importance . The term *andar* was in vogue right upto the early decades of the twentieth century - and it was sometime in the 1940s that its usage began to drop out of popular Bengali parlance and the unispatial *basa* (place of abode) or *barhi* (house) replaced it.

Women writers of the period 1876 - 1939, from Faizunnessa to Sufia Kamal, all described the *andarmahal* (or *antahpur*) and lives spent inside these quarters. However, we obtain a rather detailed picture of the *andarmahal* in '*From Purdah to Parliament*', the autobiographical book written by Shaista Ikramullah, a member of the Calcutta based Muslim aristocracy. In the opening chapter titled 'An Old Fashioned House', she described the residence of her maternal grandfather Nawab Syed Mohammad, the house in which she was born in 1915:

> I was born in Calcutta in my maternal grandfather's house. It was a very old-fashioned house, built in the style of Muslim houses of the nineteenth century... There was a small... gate which opened into a long gallery... This opened into yet another uncovered gallery which turned into a courtyard. All around the courtyard were the various living rooms... with a deep verandah running through the entire length of them and each formed a separate unit... The smaller verandahs were arranged more or less in the same manner. There was one used exclusively by young girls as

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> their sitting room, for they were not supposed to make themselves too conspicuous... There was an upper storey... But, as the windows of some of the rooms opened upon the lane, only young married couples were allowed to live in this part of the house.[6]

The verandahs, courtyards, kitchens, etc, all referred to the layout of the traditional *andarmahal.*

In a later chapter of her autobiography, Shaista described two other residences where she lived - first in Liloah where her father worked as a Government physician and then in Nagpur where her husband was posted as a high-placed Government officer in British India. The "modern" home at Liloah had no separate inner and outer quarters, (and no self-respecting maid of the old school would agree to come to work there!). The colonial bungalow at Nagpur was "modified and built on till it had taken on the look of the traditional Muslim house with the large enclosed courtyard and verandah."[7] In Najibar Rahman's best selling novel *Anowara* (1914), one of the characters, whose husband was the local lawyer, indeed had a house with an *antahpur,* but the author also described a *hall-ghar* (coined from English 'hall' and Bengali '*ghar*', a room) attached to the sleeping chamber where all the women congregated for a feast. Such passages pointed to the conflicts as well as adjustments taking place in the pattern of residence amidst a changing life-style in colonial India.

Daily Life in the *Andarmahal*

As in the Hindu household, the mistress of the house would supervise servants and other female members who had not achieved sovereign status, in cooking of meals, cleaning, serving, handing out rations, washing, etc.

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[6]See Begum Shaista S. Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament* (London: Cresset Publishers, 1963) pp.1-5.

[7]Ikramullah, ibid., p.66.

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In rich households there would be plenty of hours of relaxation which might be spent in story- telling, gossiping, sewing, reading religious texts or *punthi*, an occasional magician, snake charmer or performance.

Each stage of a woman's life was marked by a ritual to relieve the boredom of *andarmahal* life - earpiercing, completion of the Koran, a doll's marriage, birthdays, weddings and religious festivals. Syeda Monowara recorded her memories of *andarmahal* life at the turn of the century:

> Mother used to love listening to songs. Sometimes after the *Zohr* prayer she would summon all the maids to the verandah and bid them to sing... Mother would sometimes request particular songs... about weddings - the bridal toilet, the coming of the groom, songs of farewell. Sometimes Mother wanted to hear spiritual or *marfati* songs, or ancient ballads etc. Many of us would cry with emotion, at the beauty of the legends - the pathos... such as that of Princess Komolmoni.[8]

Shaista painted a vivid picture of daily life in her grandfather's residence in Calcutta around early 1920's:

> One sat and did one's sewing and reading, ate *pan* and received visitors on the verandah... Nawab Syed Mohammad (her grandfather) perforce had to accept certain things for himself, but he was determined not to accept them for his womenfolk.[9]

Both in Hindu/Brahmo and Muslim households vendors, barbers, masseuses, etc., from the outside formed the only link between the private and public spheres as well as between one family and another.[10] Shaista pointed to the link between the private and public spheres:

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[8] Syeda Monowara Khatun, p.28.

[9] Ikramullah, p.8.

[10] See Sumanta Bannerji, "*Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal*," in Sangari and Vaid, pp. 127-179.

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> There were the women vendors, the choori-wali (bangle sellers), the Bisatin (women who sold ribbons, buttons, etc.)... But the selling of their wares was the least part of these women's jobs. Their most important role was that of purveyor of news. They were, in reality, the newscarriers of the women's world.[11]

Experiences of the *andarmahal* were also recorded by Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudurani (1834-1903), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein (1880-1932), Nurunnessa Khatun (1894-1975), and Syeda Monowara Khatun (1909-1981). Their experiences of the *andarmahal*, of course, predated Shaista's. Nawab Faizunnessa made brief references to her childhood in the *andarmahal* in the preface to her book *Rupjalal* (1876). She mentioned that during her childhood her future husband Mahmud Ghazi once caught a glimpse of her. One must assume that Mahmud was allowed entry beyond the strict boundary of *purdah* into the *andarmahal* only because he was one of her relatives.

Rokeya pointed to the *andarmahal* as being the woman's sole domain in *Aborodhbasini* where she recounted episodes of women's lives behind seclusion. In *Aborodhbasini* (literally, women dwelling behind the Wall) based on real life instances one feels the full force of the separation of the *andar* from the outside world. In writing of her own childhood life in her father's stately mansion in Payraband, Rangpur, Rokeya said:

> From the age of five we girls had to observe *purdah* even from those of our own sex. Men were not allowed in the *Antahpur* so I did not have to suffer their oppression...[12]

Nurunnessa Khatun (1894-1975), the most prominent female writer of the period chosen here, was also born in an aristocratic family of Murshidabad.

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[11] Ikramullah, p.23.

[12] See *Aborodhbashini* in *Rokeya Rachanabali*, (Bengali) (Collected Works of Rokeya), Abdul Kader (ed), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1973), pp.488-489; [hereafter cited as *RR*].

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

In the presidential speech delivered at the Bengal Muslim Women's Conference in 1926 (1333 BS), Nurunnessa reminisced that inside the high walled apartments of the *andar* of her childhood home the only glory of nature that her eyes could feast on were the stars at night.

Syeda Monowara Khatun also referred to the *andarmahal* in her brief memoir *Smritir Pata*: "Purdah was very severe in the andar-mahal in our household. Even a male servant of 13 or 14 would not be allowed in".[13]

Abul Fazl (1905-1983), up and coming writer in the 1920s in Dhaka, lamented the fact that literary creativity would always be hampered in a society which provided no scope for its men to know the true feelings of its women:

> When I set out to write I realized how little we know our own society specially the domain of the family... So we would accost our mothers, aunts, sisters or cousins for glimpses of the *unknown Muslim Antahpur*.[14]

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

The birth of a female child was not considered as auspicious as that of a male child. Many families did not bother to herald the birth of a female child with the *azaan*, which is a compulsory religious custom when a male child is born. In his memoir Ibrahim Khan recorded - among other things - many rituals, customs, and attitudes of a society in transition. He wrote about his childhood locality in Tangail Sub-division and its surrounding areas. A story about the birth of a daughter:

> There was no harm in the birth of sons one after another, but the

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[13] Syeda Monowara Khatun, "*Smritir Pata*", (Bengali), (Leaves of Memory), *Ekkhon*, 5-6, 1396 BS, p.12.

[14] Abul Fazl, Introduction to M. Fatema Khanum's *Swaptarshi*, (Bengali), (Seven Stars), (Dhaka: Bulbul Publishing House, 1964), p.vii.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> birth of consecutive daughters resulted in displeasure manifesting itself in negative names such as *"Chhutiwala"*, *"Pochi"*, etc. In a nearby village a woman after giving birth to four daughters was pregnant again. Her husband had threatened her that if she gave birth to a female child again he would divorce her and cut off her nose. When a daughter was born again, the mother prepared to leave rather than be divorced.[15]

But giving birth to daughters would not always be frowned upon (the Prophet's great love for his daughter Fatema would often be invoked here).

In Bengal, a child would usually be born in a separate room, termed variously as *shutika griha* or *atur ghar*. This tradition was also practiced by many Muslim families.[16] In most cases, this would not have to be a spatially separate room or hut built specifically for the purpose as in case of Hindu women. Though urban families did not emphasize a separate *aturghar*, the practice was prevalent in rural society.[17] The official records as depicted in Censuses and Statistical Accounts refer to similar practices in both communities.[18] One contemporary recorded his observations on child birth practices in 1873:

> When a woman either Hindu or Muhammadan, approaches the term of her pregnancy, an outhouse or detached room is prepared for her to which, when labour begins she retires with a dai and a

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[15] Ibrahim Khan, *Batayan*, (Bengali), (Window), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1967), p.209-10

[16] See Najibar Rahman, *Anowara*, pp. 215-218.

[17] Therese Blanchet in her study *Meaning and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1984) has uncovered many non-Islamic or syncretic beliefs and rituals surrounding childbirth in present day Bangladesh.

[18] In this connection some interviewees stated that for Muslim women, the conditions and rituals of confinement were not as severe as for Hindu women. But the picture is far from being clear as others insisted that things were not so different for the two communities.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> servant, This den to which the highest as well as the lowest is condemned, is known as the Asaucha-ghar...[19]

Women writing in the period have testified to happy childhoods, in spite of severe *purdah* and lack of education. The more fortunate of them who spent their early lives in sprawling houses set amid expansive grounds (before these families became urban dwellers in the truest sense of the word) have some happier memories, as we find in Rokeya:

> Where may one find a comparison to our house and its grounds, shaded by forests on all sides?... We rise to the cry of the morning birds; the call of the foxes signals that *maghreb* (evening) prayer is near... Our childhood passed in bliss in the midst of shady forests in rural Bengal.[20]

Nawab Faizunnessa also referred to a happy childhood in the preface to *Rupjalal*. These women belonged to upper or middle class landed gentry which formed a part of the traditional *shurafa* - which soon made way for the new professional Muslim elite drawn along the lines of the Brahmo/-Hindu *bhadrolok* class. They did not, by dint of their class situation, experience the hardships the vast majority of children faced every day, later, many of them had to struggle hard. The comfort and luxury of their earlier lives had become things of the past. Rokeya, Monwara, Mamlukul Fatema, and Sufia Kamal had to take up a job to make ends meet, often after their widowhood or separation; but as children, they seldom knew what hardship meant. Their early childhoods were mostly spent inside the andar-mahal, playing with dolls or romping round the garden, listening to stories and fairy tales told by grandmothers or other elderly house-inmates, learning and reading religious texts and an occasional children's

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[19] James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1883), pp. 50-51.

[20] Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein, in *RR*, pp.195-196.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

story book. As girls, they were also taught to help in household chores, in cooking, sewing, knitting and embroidering. From an early age, they were brought up with the "ultimate" goal of a woman in mind, that is, the role of a wife and mother.

Childhood in the period under review did not last long for a girl by present day standards. It would end almost at the age of six or seven when she would be put in *purdah* and shortly afterwards she would be considered ready for marriage. Manowara recollected the end of childhood:

> When I was six or seven I had already finished three Urdu texts which included *Behesti Zewar* and *Maftuhul Jinnat* (these were read out to me). My mother wanted that I should complete the instructional and scriptural texts by the age of seven so that by the age of eight I could be married off.[21]

ROLE MODELS

Norms and concepts of what woman's role should be and what womanhood comprised of - and women's response to these - all generated an engrossing and continual discourse. It was formulated in the mosques, at home, in the fictional and non-fictional literature of the time, in politics and in the world of culture - there was no aspect of life free from it. The mental world of the Muslims in Bengal was made immensely more complex by the extraterritorial culture of Pan Islam. At the apex of the ideological world stood the Holy Koran, considered eternal, immutable, and final by devout Muslims, governing every aspect of their spiritual and material life. The all-embracing Islamic law or *sharia* is difficult to define in a few words. However, the foundational principles of *sharia*, as expounded by 8th century jurists such as Al-Shafi, were based on

a) the *Koran* b) the *Hadith* (recorded sayings, views, explanations

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[21] Syeda Monowara Khatun, p.29.

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> of the Prophet) and *Sunna* (model behaviour based on the conduct of the Prophet) c) *Ijma* (consensus among the Community of believers) d) *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and e) *Ijtehad* (original thought or research based on or exercised through *Qiyas*).[22]

Though not given the status of *sharia*, a vast number of religious tracts and manuals developed subsequently in various regions of the Islamic world which conveyed, explained, interpreted, and in many cases added to the provisions of the Koran and Hadith. Unlike classics such as Bukhari's Hadith these forms of didactic literature appealed to the masses. Along with the spoken word of the *mullas* (in the form of the *Khutba, Fatwa*, and *Waz*) they brought Islam to the homes of the populace, filtered through the prism of the mullah's interpretative faculties. The Koran lays down a fairly clear and strict code of conduct for all believers. But, for centuries, critical passages were taken up by countless jurists, commentators, and preachers to provide the inviolable model of female behaviour.[23]

The Punthi Tradition

In the pre-modern age the literate Muslims either read texts in Persian-Arabic-Urdu, or *mishro-bhasa punthi*. Originally *punthi* referred to hand-written books - composed mostly in simple verse. Till the late nineteenth century *Nasihat-namas*, a special brand of *punthi* literature meant to be recited, were the most popular medium of didactic instruction. Many of these had Arabic titles but were written in Bengali. The socio-economic conditions of colonial rule in Bengal from 1757-1857 (the period of company

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[22] See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1966).

[23] Of late, feminist scholars who happen to live under Muslim Law, are making a thorough study of Koranic passages claim to have found numerous distortions and manipulations of the provisions of original passages. These claims are based on the scope for an interpretation (*tafsir)* of Koranic provisions and the etymology of the Arabic language.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

rule), created an ethos of cultural decay and erosion. This according to Anisuzzaman generated an ambience for the development of *punthi* composition in *'misra-bhasha riti'* (Bengali mixed with Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit). These epics pointed to a decline in the state of women judging by a distrust of them and a belief in their fickle and lowly nature displayed in the writers' portrayal of female characters. 'Love' too was debased in these eighteenth and nineteenth Century *punthis.* These popular didactic texts must have created and reflected the existing discourses on women. *Tambiatunnessa,* the work of the poet Maleh Mohammad, "a repository of advice to women" was one such work.

Garibullah whose father hailed from Dhaka, composed several pieces centreing around women. *Imandar Nek Bibir Keccha* (story of the Pious and Faithful Lady) celebrated "the medieval devotion of a wife to her husband though her status and nature are otherwise debased."[24] The poet also eulogized the devotion piety and chastity of women such as Bibi Fatema (the work was based on the Urdu 'Tambiatunnessa'). In an appendage titled *Kolikaler Aurater Bayan* or "The Ways of a Woman of Kalijug (modern age)", the punthi-writer derided the *Kalijug* woman:

> Garibullah says what can I expound
> The vices of women in Kalijug bound.
> In neighbour's house they talk ill of spouse
> Neglecting chores in the house
> The women gather and heap abuse
> On husband, home and whatever they choose.
> Some say, 'He buys no jewels for me
> Accursed may his earnings be.'
> They while the hours, work undone

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[24] Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manas O Bangla Sahitya 1757 - 1918,* (Bengali), (The Muslim Mind and Bengali Literature), (Dhaka: Muktadhara, 1964), p.138.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

The women of Kalijug shameless ones![25]

In "Harh Jwalani" (1864), a short playlet written in the form of a conversation, the writer Ghulam Husain bemoaned the advent of *Kalijug*, in which the traditional family structure was breaking down - that is, the daughter in-law wanted to reign and the mother in-law's power was on the wane. The alert 'modern' bride did not want to accommodate her mother in-law and the son acquiesced and the mother turned out of the house was forced to stalk the streets begging. The theme of the manipulative wife (often a second one), poisoning the ears of the besotted husband against the mother in-law or step-daughter (the latter pious and chaste) became a recurring one among male writers of the subsequent period.

These books were popular among the Muslim 'literati' in town and village. It is to be remembered that Muslim society in 19th century Bengal was a pre-dominantly 'rural' one. As the middle class was taking shape and urban migration intensified, a lot of rural culture seeped into the towns. By Faizunnessa's time there were a few prose works by Muslim writers (e.g. *Bishad Shindhu*), but poetry had by no means lost its popularity as a medium.

Biographies.

Role models upheld in front of Muslim girls were: Bibi Fatema (the Prophet's daughter), Bibi Rahima (wife of the Biblical prophet Ayub), Bibi Khadija, Ayesha and other wives of Prophet Muhammad, Khaola, Umme Aban, Umme Amara (female warriors of the early Arab empire), Rabeya the mystic saint, Razia Sultan and Chand Sultana (heroic warriors closer to home), Gul Badan, Nurjehan and Jahanara (learned ladies of the Mughal Court), etc. They were all-time favourites, and their popularity endures to this day.

[25] Cited in Anisuzzaman, p.138. (Translation mine).

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These historical figures each represented one all important virtue a young girl should inculcate. Thus Fatema's life was an example of filial loyalty as was Jahanara's (who also exemplified scholarship); Bibi Rahima was the ultimate example of devotion to husband and God; Khadija and Ayesha also stood for wifely love and devotion, Khaola, Umme Aban, Umme Hakim and other 'biranganas' were extolled for their valour in defending Islam and their own honour.[26] Rabeya alone was different in that she trod a homeless, heartless, husbandless path - that of a sufi saint - an Islamic equivalent to Meera. Interestingly of the few Hindu women extolled by Muslims were Sita and Sati, both renowned for their wifely devotion.

As late as 1912/1926 Maulvi Dewan Nasiruddin Ahmed's *Pati Bhakti*, handed out *masahel* (advice) for girls, and held up once more the examples of Hawa (Eve), Khadija, Ayesha, Sauda, Fatema, Asma binte Yezid, Umme Abban, Zobeda Khatun, Mumtaz Mahal, Romesa, etc.

Didactic Manuals.

As the urban middle class grew in number, accompanied by the development of modern Bengali prose in the latter half of the last century, the *Namas* were replaced by a spate of instructional literature meant to be read rather than heard. As Urdu was the medium of instruction in *maktab* and *madrasa*— widespread, indigenous educational institutions for Muslims in Bengal before the colonial system of education took over—initially a lot of Urdu prose works were imported into Bengal from North India and some were even composed indigenously. From the early decades of the 20th century religious scholars, imbued with a reformistic zeal, started writing

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[26] Later, throughout 1915-17, *Al-Eslam* ran a series celebrating these heroines titled "*Moslem Birangana*", written by Eslamabadi. The model women included Khansa, Khaola, Umme Hakim, Umme Aban, Umme Isa, Johaoyza, Umme Ammara, Umme Haram, Asma, Umme Khayer Nurjehan, Aga Begum, Rajia Begum, Golebehest, etc.

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didactic manuals meant for the changing life-style of the rising middle-class Muslims. The most famous manual of this genre was Ashraf Ali Thanawi's monumental treatise *Behesti Zewar* (Ornament of Heaven), first published in 1905. It was translated into Bengali from Calcutta in 1925 (and later in Dhaka in 1961).

Thanawi's work was part of the Muslim Reformist Project, aimed at creating the new model woman, the Heavenly Ornament. As a western critic and translator of the book has observed:

> The teachings of the ulama were meant to create a certain kind of person... individually responsible for the fulfilment of obligations and unfailingly self-controlled.... Many of the concerns of the *ulama* were well illustrated in one of their most influential books, the *Behesti Zewar* Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi (1864-1943) written at the turn of this century. The book was meant to be a complete education of a respectable Muslim girl or woman.[27]

The Zevar was a book about what kind of person every woman, in fact, every human being should be. "The kind of person Thanavi envisages is associated with sustained formation and discipline".[28] That woman is quiet, guarded, reflective, orderly, clean, systematic, honourable, pure and pious. As North Indian texts were always imported sooner or later in Bengal, the book not only became popular - it spawned Bengali versions based on its style and content. The *Zewar* was on the syllabi at Rokeya's Sakhawat Memorial Girls School. Monowara Khatun remembered elders reading it when she was a child.

The new manuals written in chaste prose differed from its predecessors

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[27] Barbara Metcalf, "Thanavi and Urdu Literature", in Christopher Shackle (ed), *Urdu and Muslim South Asia*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 93.

[28] Metcalf, ibid. p. 99.

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in one important respect. They were meant to be read by girls themselves, comprehended intellectually, emotionally, and acted upon. Various elements went into the making of the new woman - to whom the manuals were addressed - and whom they also aimed to construct - and she was by no means a monolithic entity. The important point was that the manuals were self-contained and self-sufficient, sole guides in the turbulent sea of colonial India, for the pious but practical Muslim girl. Though older texts and models persisted, there was a shift toward comprehensive compendiums which any *individual* girl whose faculties had been 'opened' (a condition the *Zewar* insisted on) through education, could comprehend, interpret and act upon. All the existing virtues were kept intact; to those were added more practical instructions and advice on cooking, cleaning, child rearing, home medicine, religious duties, marital duties and rights, travelling, shopping, posting letters etc. In short, the *Behasti Zewar* was to be the model and guide for the Muslim girl now re-formed, so that she could steer herself and preserve her tradition, religion and purity in changing times, contributing at the same time to the growth of the Muslim polity by producing ideal citizens. Representing what may be termed the conservative strand of Reformism, the novelty of the book lay in the *agency* given to the female reader, albeit an agency circumscribed by total patriarchal control. The emphasis in manuals such as *Behesti Zewar* had shifted from concrete examples (though they still held their ground) to 'abstract' values of female domesticity and virtue. New social conditions had called for new female personalities, and new role models.

Thus, it was that when Maulvi M. Sanaullah in 1937 decided to write another manual for girls, he named it *Adarsha Balika* - the Ideal Girl. It was meant for young girls and the author took them by hand showing them the way to ideal womanhood, step by step.

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PUBERTY AND PREPARATIONS FOR MARRIAGE

With the onset of puberty which occurred early in tropical climates, a girl's training was complete and she was considered physically and mentally ready for marriage. The onset of menstruation was an important event in a girl's life, for thereafter she would be considered a truly 'sexual' being, but the matter was hardly ever discussed. "Menstruation was a closed chapter, a secret operation", commented a highly educated and independent-minded interviewee. She described the prevalent attitudes towards this subject and general practices as she knew them during the late 1920s as follows:

> Girls who had been married very early were now deemed ready for conjugal life and sent to their *swashur barhi* (abode of the father in-Law). The elders rarely, perhaps never, told them the 'secrets' of menstruation. They would only be 'cautioned' and asked to maintain *purdah* more strictly. As sanitary pads were not known in those days, improvised substitutes such as clean gauze, cotton or cloth from old saris, or sometimes even mosquito-nets, would be used. Soiled cloth would be burned, buried or thrown, far from the house. As families moved to urban centres, the handy pail came into vogue. A feeling of great shame accompanied the process and none really knew why.[29]

Menstruation and its connection with pregnancy were surrounded by myths and the puritan ethic filtering in from Victorian England made the subject taboo as Bengali women underwent modernization. One interviewee recalled that some girls even denied having periods.[30]

Ideological preparations for marriage were ample. All didactic manuals emphasized the point that the ultimate roles a woman would have to play

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[29] Interview: Mrs Meherunnessa Islam, Dec 1990 - Jan 1991

[30] Interview: Zubaida Mirza, Nov. 1991

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were those of wife and mother. The grandmother's advice to the 16-year old Anowara, the heroine of the novel "Anowara" (1914), prior to the latter's departure for her husband's home is reminiscent of the advice given to Sita and Shakuntala in Hindu mythology:

> It is not ordained that a girl spend her entire life in a father's house. According to *shariat*, her husband's home is her true abode. Moreover, if she fails in her wifely duties - all her piety goes in vain. Therefore, consider the prosperity of your in-law's abode your sacred duty. Thus I send you to your husband's home.[31]

Shaista corroborated this in her memoir:

> Girls in my days were brought up with the one and only view of doing credit to their mother in *Susral*. Here again I want to say that the hold this sort of conditioned reflex takes on one's mind is very strong... So it was that trained to accept marriage as the eventual goal of one's existence and the arranging of it as the absolute right of one's parents,... I had no feeling of resentment against it.[32]

Although there were ample preparations for the material aspect of womanhood (such as cooking, sewing, cleaning, account-keeping) as well as its non-material aspect (such as care of husband, tending him, pleasing him), preparations for the sexual aspect of conjugal life were next to nothing. There were some non-standard sex manuals available during this period, but one suspects that the readership was totally male. One such manual for Muslims was *Lajjatunnessa* by A. Ali Ahmad, published from Calcutta in 1897. Several interviewees acknowledge having heard of the book and a few had seen it.[33] Another popular book "Adhunika Stree" (The Modern Wife)

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[31] Mohammad Najibur Rahman, *Anowara*, (first published 1914; Dhaka: Ananda Prakashan, 1988), p.64.

[32] Ikramullah, p.51.

[33] Sexuality is still a taboo subject in Bangladesh society and as such

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by Mrs Aqiqunnessa Ahmad was written for the more genteel audience of the 1940s. But, as noted before, preparations for the sexual aspect of marriage were meagre. Educated girls would sometimes read up 'adult' novels in secret and often such knowledge would have to suffice. Shaista described a scene in the *andarmahal* just prior to her marriage in 1933 — how her cousins descended on her, teasing and talking about her future husband, and how that "built up a pseudo-romantic atmosphere for the whole thing".[34]

However, all brides were not so fortunate. Tales of horror about the bridal night were not uncommon, as one interviewee disclosed. She had seen cousins getting married in the 1930s. They would be shoved (good naturedly) into the bridal chamber by older relatives - and would gradually learn to accept the role of meeting a man's physical need. She had rarely come across a girl who said she enjoyed sex at that time.[35]

Selecting A Bride.

Marriages would be arranged by guardians. Seldom if ever in *sharif* (or in later parlance, *bhadro*) society did girls and boys get a chance to meet each other prior to marriage. Individual preferences played a minor part and guardians generally went by a set of 'standard' conditions. The ideal criteria for selecting spouses were laid down in manuals and contemporary periodicals. One of the *Hadith* that inspired the discourse on marriage set down in later manuals, dealt with the motivation behind selecting a woman as partner: "The Prophet said that the woman can be married for her

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it is difficult to broach the subject in interviews with elderly women. However, several interviewees were very reassuring, if not informative.

[34] Ikramullah, p. 53

[35] Interview: Mehrunnessa Islam.

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religion, for her fortune or for her beauty. Be motivated in your choice by her religion."[36]

The *Behesti Zewar* was concerned with the construction of the dutiful and pious Muslim woman who would be equipped on the one hand to *preserve* religion and tradition and, on the other, to deal with the novel situation of a changed (colonial) social order. It left no topic untouched -- from marriage to mailing letters. Marriage, the text maintained, was an obligation in Islam and the family a building block of the social order. According to Thanawi, courtship was an abominable Christian custom which was being resorted to by contemporary Indian Muslims who fancied this made them 'modern'.

Ismail Hussain Shirazi (1880-1931), social critic and reformist, lamented the fact that the new generation of educated young men emphasized the false criteria of beauty and wealth in selecting a spouse. On the other hand, the wife's side usually considered property, wealth or a well-paying job as the criteria for a good bride-groom. Shirazi criticized these practices and lauded the norms prevalent in Europe and America and recognized the research done in the West on sexual pairing, suitability, compatibility, etc. Unfortunately, these aspects were neglected by Bengali youths. The criteria for selection which Shirazi favoured were lineage, learning, refinement, character, health and finally beauty and accomplishment. In setting down the ideal ages at marriage he apprehended the Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 and the Age of Consent Act of 1930.[37]

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[36] A. Tarmidi, *Sunan-al-Tarmidi*, n.d.- Medina, p.275, Chapter 4, Hadith 1095, cited by Mernissi, *Beyond...*, p.54

[37] Ismail Hossain Shirazi, "Bibaho Niti", (Procedure for Marriage), *Al-Eslam*, 5: 7, Kartik 1326 BS, cited in Mustafa Nurul Islam, p. 79 .

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Age at Marriage

As early as Adam's education reports of 1835 and 1838, the wide prevalence of child marriage had been mentioned in official discourse as a deterrent to female education. Hunter in his Statistical Accounts of Bengal, presented a report on marriage norms in 1873:

> Both among Muhammadans and Hindus, boys are generally married between the ages of 15 and 20... Girls are usually married at 10 and have no choice. The parents arrange the match if possible in their own village.[38]

Child marriage, featured as an important issue on the agenda of the nineteenth century Reform Movement in Bengal. In both communities it would not be unusual to find marriages between girls of seven and boys of ten. (the brides who crossed the threshold of the illustrious Tagore family in Jorasanko, were in many instances 'child brides' or *balika bañdhu*). In the 1890s, a proposed government legislation in family law —Age of Consent Bill— generated a great debate among all sections of the population. In effect, the 1891 Bill was an extension of the 1872 Brahmo Native Marriage Act, to the Hindu community, and proposed to raise the age of cohabitation from 10 to 12 years.[39] Basically the bill proposed that intercourse/cohabitation with a girl below 12, married or unmarried, was tantamount to rape and a punishable offence.

In the agitation that followed, Hindus were the main opponents but

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[38] W. W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. vi (Noakhali), (London: 1877; rept. N. Delhi: Govt. of India: 1973), p.279.

[39] For full discussions see C.H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, (New Jersey: Princeton University press, 1964); Dagmar Engels, "The Age of Consent Act of 1891: Colonial Ideology in Bengal", in *South Asia Research*, Vol. 3: 2, November 1983; and Rosalind O Hanlon, "Issues of Widowhood in Colonial Western India", in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds), *Contesting Power Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)

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some sections of the Muslims also joined in. The Sudhakar group opposed the bill and Muslim participation was noticeable in the protest meeting organized in Dhaka. Syed Golam Mustafa, Maulvi Makbul Ali, Munshi Bazlur Rahman, Maulvi Shamsul Huq, and Kaikobad all joined in the protest. However, the two leading Muslim associations - The Muhammadan Literary Society and The Central Muhammadan Association, supported the bill as did Maulvi Abdul Jabbar deputy magistrate of Alipore, Nawab Ahsanullah of Dhaka and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.

As the ideas of the Bengal Renaissance started to permeate, and old socio-economic structures started to undergo various transformations, the question of child marriage became a topic for concern. In the Muslim Community, one of the earliest and most vocal social critics Nausher Ali Khan Yusufazai (1864-1964) referred with concern to the practice of child-marriage in his classical work *'Bangiyo Mussulman'* (1890). Sometime later, Mohammad Meherullah Hussein from Sirajganj (in Pabna) wrote a reformist tract on child marriage (in 1909). He, like his predecessor, stated that Muslim society was rampant with ill practices rather than beneficial ones, of which Child Marriage topped the list.[40] Meherullah concluded that ignorance, ill health, loss of wealth and vitality were the ill effects of child marriage and appealed to fellow Muslims to weed out the 'evil practice'. He also recommended twenty and fourteen as the ages when boys and girls should be married off by their parents, thus apprehending the recommendations of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 and the Age of Consent Act of 1930.

And yet the notion of child marriage had provoked no such diatribe only a few decades earlier. The custom was in practice in rural and semi-rural areas, if not in towns in the early decades of the present

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[40] M. Meherullah Hussein, *Balya Bibaher Bishmoy Phol*, (Bengali), (The Poisonous Effects of Child Marriage), (Sirajganj: Author, 1909)

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century. It was not unusual to have daughters married at the age of 10 or 12 as late as 1930. (See Appendix for a list of women discussed in this study and their ages at marriage).

The Ceremony

The wedding ceremony itself could be very elaborate or simple depending on the wealth and tastes of the families concerned. Three accounts of Muslim weddings cited below which took place over a period of 60 years show the tenacity of some aspects of ritual life.

The first is an account from that oft-cited feat of colonial record keeping, Hunter's *Statistical Account*; the second from an aricle published in a journal in 1922; the third is a bride's description of her own wedding in Calcutta in 1933. Hunter was sent the report of a wedding in a semi-rural society by Mr King, collector of Noakhali:

> ... The parents arrange the marriage if possible in their own village...Among Muhammadans the bridegroom's father gives the marriage present which consist of clothes, ornaments and a written agreement... Among Muhammadans, the bridegroom with his relatives (etc.) meet on the appointed day in the outer apartment of the bride's house...a wakil and two witnesses are appointed. The wedding present is handed to the wakil who takes it to the bride and is thereupon empowered by her to intimate to the bridegroom her consent to the marriage... the mullah reads the religious service. The guests are feasted.[41]

This description went down to the last detail including the glass of *sharbet* drunk by husband and wife in the *andar*.

An article in *Sadhana*, published 46 years after Hunter's, resembled the former description quite closely:

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[41] Hunter, *Statistical*, vol. vi, Noakhali, p. 279

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> Muslim marriage is based on consent between the bride and groom... On the appointed day the bridegroom's party goes to the girl's house where she is kept in the *andar*. A *wakil* is appointed...", etc.[42]

Shaista Ikramullah got married in Calcutta in 1933. Though resident in Bengal for more than two generations, her family had persevered in the Indo-persian lifestyle of the 'high' Muslim culture of North India. The ceremonies she described were representative of the weddings in her particular social class and culture. Shaista devoted an entire chapter to her wedding: the *Mayur* ceremony — the anointing of oils, perfumes, henna and herbal pastes; the elaborate coiffure; the trousseau — the arrival of the bridegroom's procession with the gift which consisted of "seven beautiful saris... a complete set of jewelery, *sehra* and mounds of *luddoos*". She went on to describe the appointment of the *wakil* who came in for the consent, the marriage deed which was signed, the banquet, the gold coins given as *salami* to the couple when they were seated on the dais made for them, the *Runumai* ceremony where the groom and bride saw each other and finally the *sopna* where the couples' guardians gave the groom and bride away. The rituals continued for hours. Shaista wrote:

> ... between my father's attempt at modernization and the rest of the family's determination to forestall him in his efforts, a compromise was reached. The ceremonies did not quite go on till the early hours of the morning. They finished, I believe, somewhere near half past one.[43]

The above accounts of marriage ceremony, taken from three generations, indicate the enduring nature of tradition which was carried over well into

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[42] Tarikul Alam "Bibaha O Nari", (Bengali), (Marriage and Women), *Sadhana*, 4: 1, 70-71, Baisakh, 1329 BS

[43] Ikramullah, p.58

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the 20th century, even when the familial patterns started changing.

Muslim Marriage

In Islam marriage is a contract between two consenting parties. It is prescribed by God for all Muslim adults capable of normal functioning. Though the vows are sacred and to be cherished, they are part of a larger network of terms - duties and obligations, bound together by love. The vows are not 'till death do the partners part', nor do they extend beyond death. Theoretically, a marriage may be terminated if any partner fails in his or her duties and desires to end the relationship. The ceremony itself is simple. It requires the consent of the couple to be married in the presence of two witnesses and a representative (called *wakil*) appointed by the girl. The terms specify the couples' identity and the amount of *mohr* (dower-money) to be given by the groom to the bride as security. All these and other vital stipulations in keeping with the *shariat* may be put down on a paper called the *kabin-nama*. The groom or bride has the right to withhold consent without which, in theory, the marriage cannot take place. Hunter referred to the *kabin-nama* in his *Statistical Account* of 1876:

> It is also customary to register a certain document, by which a dower of about Rs. 100 is settled upon the bride, and among the more respectable classes such a paper carries with it certain legal rights, duly set down in the Muhammadan law books.[44]

Mohr or dower-money was a widely discussed issue in the early part of this century. Moniruzzaman Islamabadi pointed to excessive dower as a social evil which spelt the ruin of many illustrious families. Among middle class families it was customary to fix upon four to five hundred rupees while the rich often raised it to a *lac* (one hundred thousand). Although

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[44] Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol VI, Tipperah, 1876, (New Delhi: 1973), p. 383

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dower became a mark of social status, it was originally designed to provide security to the wife. The *mohr* was an important obligation for the husband but he could be released from it if the wife so desired and an ideal wife was supposed to do so.

Marital Rights and Duties

In Brahmo as in Islamic discourse, the ideal marriage was possible only if the wife submitted to the husband and considered him next only to God.[45] The popular manual *Grihinir Kartavya* by Annadacharan Sengupta (1884) spelt out marital duties and the wife was instructed to obey rules very similar to those set down in manuals for Muslim women. One of the most important sections in all manuals would be the rights and duties of husband and wife. Besides, contemporary periodicals also abounded with essays on the topic.

Most manuals including *Behesti Zewar* reported the Prophet to have said that if it were not forbidden in Islam to bow to any other than God, he would have asked wives to bow to their husbands. The Prophet was further reported, the manuals informed, to have said that if a husband commands his wife to carry the stones of one mountain to another, this hard and meaningless task should be performed without query or delay.

According to Thanawi's manual, the groom's vows should be to provide wife with food, clothing, shelter, to protect her honour and to treat her kindly. It laid down that a home was the creation of two human beings, but if both went different ways that home could not prosper. So, the argument of the book went, one had to bow down and accept the other's wishes, in a sense to be absorbed by the other in order to create one 'full' entity (and that one who must bow down was, of course, the wife). As such the

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[45] See *Bama Bodhini Patrika*, December 1894, "*Hindu Narir Garhastya Dharma*", in Borthwick, p. 145

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wife must pledge that she would merge her existence into that of her husband's; his children, honour and assets were to be her assets, their preservation her duty.[46] The joint vow was mainly sexual — wherein couples pledged not to engage in illicit sex; and to maintain sanctity of marriage (honesty for males, chastity for females).

Thus was the stage set for the reconstruction of the reformed Muslim woman. Ghulam Rahman's *Moqsudul Momenin O Stree Shiksha*, which was just as popular, if not more so than *Zewar* was in great part an emulation of the classic. '*Moqsudul Momenin*' listed 35 pieces of advice ('*nasihat*') for the model wife. The salient ones included strict abidance by Godly duties, truthfulness and prayer, *purdah*, total submission to one's husband, preservation of his assets, and even forbearance of husband's chastisement, verbal or physical whether fair or unfair. Detailed instructions for wifely /domestic duties were laid down which ranged from sexual cooperation to placing the *badna* (water-mug) in front of him before he asked for it. A 'model wife' was urged to exempt her husband from the *mohr* (This last corroded whatever right the woman had been bestowed by *shariat*).

Manuals laid down a corresponding list of duties and obligations for men which in the main enjoined the husband to keep the wife in love, comfort and dignity. Women's rights were protected in that it was declared unfair for a guardian to wed his female ward to an undesirable man. Unequal matches were discouraged. Child marriage was censured. Dowry was forbidden and women's right to sexual gratification was acknowledged.

A spate of Bengali manuals were popular fare throughout the early 20th

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[46] Ashraf Ali Thanawi, *Behesti Zewar* (orig. in Urdu), (Heavenly Ornament) Bengali translation by Maulana Shamsul Huq, Vol I, (Dhaka: Emdadiya Library, 1961), p. 249

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

century (See Section on 'Role Models' above). *Taujihul Adab*, a Bengali work written for the 'common-folk', was published from Calcutta in 1924, and its author claimed that his book was an amalgam of classic manuals such as Hazrat Jilani's *Guniyat-ut-Talebeen*, Sadi's *Bosta*, etc. The '*Adab*' contained sections titled '*Bibaho Pronali*' (Marriage Procedure), '*Sahabash Pronali*' (Procedures of Cohabitation, see below), etc.

Nonetheless, it was amazing that the religious tracts and manuals sometimes took the interpretation of the Koran so far that one could hardly discern the link to the original source. In many places Koranic rights of women were eroded (e.g. exemption of *mohr*, waiving of the provision of obtaining a clear consent from the bride during marriage, waiving of property rights). It would be unhistorical to dismiss these texts whose readership consisted of a large section of the lay population particularly the middle and the lower middle class.

The Practice of Polygamy.

Islamic scriptures allowed *polygamy*[47] in the exclusive sense of *polygyny* quite clearly - although as some Koranic scholars writing at that time pointed out - under certain circumstances and certain conditions. In India, polygamy was by no means a Muslim monopoly, as pointed out by scholars such as Kumari Jayawardena.[48] 'Kulinism' in Hindu society could often lead to a man having several wives. Official reports such as the censuses revealed that cases of polygamy were to be found in Hindu society also.

Right upto the twentieth century polygamy was accepted as a norm and it was customary for a woman to have a co-wife or *sateen*, as did Faizun-

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[47] I have used the term polygamy as it is more popular than the technically correct polygyny.

[48] Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Zed Press, 1984)

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nessa and Kulsum Bibi. Hunter's statistical account of Tipperah district published in 1876, referred to the practice:

> Polygamy is of course permitted among the Muhammadans. If the first wife is quarrelsome or ugly, or if there is a great deal of household work, a second wife is required...[49]

Throughout the nineteenth century, judging from literary evidence, the prospect of a co-wife was not always great cause for concern. Many of the educated Muslim *bhadromohila* of the twentieth century, in their writings or interviews, referred to grandmothers who had *sateen*. Some ambivalence, however, always surrounded the issue. As early as 1867 Munshi Namdar in a piece *'Dui Sateener Jhagrha'* (A Quarrel Between Two Co-wives) cautioned readers about the discord that might ensue from practising polygamy.[50]

Nausher Ali Khan Yusufzai who may be considered a notable social analyst of the day by dint of his nineteenth century treatise on the Muslim community *Bangiyo Musulman* (1890), referred to the practice of polygamy:

> Our gaze has not yet turned to the poisonous effects of polygamy the chief of which are production of too many children, domestic dissension and female suicide.... the incidence of polygamy is not small by any count in this country. Among the Muslims of Bengal for every 1000 married males there are 1033 married females, i.e. 4% of marriages are polygamous.[51]

Ibrahim Khan in a section titled *'Bohubibaho'* (polygamy) wrote about the practice of having several wives in the preceding generations, among high

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[49]Hunter, *Statistical*, vol. VI (Tipperah), p.383

[50]Cited by Kazi Abdul Mannan, *Adhunik Bangla Sahityo O Muslim Samaj*, (Bengali), (Modern Bengali Literature and Muslim Society), (Dhaka: Bangladesh Book Corporation, 1990), pp.141-143.

[51]Nausher Ali Khan Yusufzai, *Bangiyo Musulman*, p.34.

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born and low born alike:

> In days of yore, girls only thought it natural that healthy, well-to-do young men would have several wives, and they conditioned themselves accordingly. Sometimes the relation between co-wives would be one of great love and respect... However sometimes there would be cause for discord.[52]

He reported a lament he had heard from a co-wife, which showed the tension between old values and new:

> Do you know what my educated brother said when I accusingly asked how he could have agreed to give me away in marriage to a man who already had a wife? He said 'Oh, be quiet. Our paternal grandfather had three wives, and our maternal one had two. We are quite familiar with the custom.' Perhaps the "graduate" brother did regret the sister's marriage to such a man, but what can one say, if this is the way in which he evaded the question![53]

Syeda Monowara Khatun in her short memoir also referred to polygamous marriages in the family's past, in the latter half of the 19th Century:

> Let me describe the *zamindar* household into which my elder sister was married. My brother-in-law had four or five mothers. His father's first wife was called Badrunnessa. But brother-in-law's father was a debauchee, whiling his days in wine and women. If ever he chanced upon a pretty girl who took his fancy he married her.[54]

According to Monowara, all these events took place around 1850, long before her birth in 1909 (1316 BS). Monowara described Badrunnessa's wifely duties and life in the *andarmahal.* She had heard these narratives

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[52]Ibrahim Khan, p.82.

[53]Ibrahim Khan, p. 82-83

[54]Syeda Monowara Khatun, p.8

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from one of Badrun's co-wives. Monowara reminded the reader that these were not tales but facts, albeit, gathered from an indirect source. Though there was a train of servants and maids, Badrun attended to all her husband's needs herself, her sole creed was wifely devotion. She dressed the younger co-wives, did up their hair and sent them in to their lord. Badrun was educated - she administered the estate from behind a curtain. One day Badrun's husband who already had four wives returned with another. When news of this was sent to the andar, Badrun came and pleaded to her husband:

> You already have four wives and *shariat* allows only that many. Divorce me then before you receive the new bride - she is young and fresh.[55]

The husband trapped, (Monowara reminded the reader at this point that the estate belonged to Badrun's father) sent the new bride away. When Badrun's husband was 50 years old he married a girl of seven and Badrun almost 'raised' the child — by teaching her how to do household work, to read the Koran, to offer prayer, to please one's husband, etc. Such was Badrun, an epitome of the matriarch. The pattern of Badrun's domestic life was repeated through her step-son Mahmud, Monowara's brother-in-law.

Unfortunately, Syeda Monowara Khatun never got to the point of her own marriage in her memoir - though she did describe her struggle after her widowhood. Her husband, who served under colonial administration, took only one wife. The olden days of ease and comfort were fast vanishing for the *sharif* households and Monowara widowed rather early found herself in dire straits. To make ends meet she took up a job and thus raised her family. Monowara's life reflected the womanhood in transition, part old and part new.

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[55] Syeda Monowara Khatun, pp.8-9

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By the first decades of this century when a section of the Muslim society had made the transition to modernity, the English educated Muslim *bhadrolok*, started to look upon the practice of polygamy with some disfavour. Gradually its occurrence became rarer among the educated class. This can be gleaned from the debates on the issue in contemporary periodicals. Monogamy was fast becoming the marital norm. The Census of India reviewed the situation thus:

> ...in practice except among wealthy Muhammadans, a second wife is very rarely taken unless the first one is barren or suffers from some incurable disease... The excess of wives is greatest among Muhammadans (21 per mille) in case of Hindus and Buddhists it is only 8 and 7 per mille respectively.[56]

That attitudes to polygamy had undergone changes were apparent from gleanings from the popular press. The popular press itself represented diverse views ranging from the orthodox to the liberal, and various shades in between. Often a certain individual or periodical harboured views that were conservative on some issues and liberal on others. Conversely, individuals and journals that had very different ideological stands, agreed surprisingly on a single issue. One point was clear: the practice of polygamy as a form of marriage was increasingly being questioned.

The liberal reformists referred to by the orthodox as the *nabya Muslim* were deeply stirred by the Bengal Awakening and advocated modernization along 'rational-utilitarian' lines, not, however, violating religion as *they* interpreted it. The most vocal mouth-piece of the orthodox camp was the Sudhakar group which published *Sudhakar* (later *Mihir O' Sudhakar*). The *Islam Pracharak*, also conservative, published in its 1903 issue an article by Sheikh Jamiruddin criticizing polygamy. The writer no longer saw any

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[56] *Census of India 1901*, vol 1 A Report (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902), p. 447

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religious or political justification for the continuance of polygamy. Jamiruddin pointed out that in the vast province of Bengal inhabited by almost 30 million Muslims, only 10% to 15% practised polygamy. He deplored the situation which led to the tyranny of co-wives and resulted in suicide:

> In whichever light we view the matter, man and woman have equal rights. Then why do men perpetuate such an oppression and injustice on women that violates the law of Nature and God? True, Islam sanctions polygamy, but have we forgotten the conditions and circumstances under which it is permissible?[57]

The 'liberal' literary monthly *Nabanur* also joined in the discussion. In '*Bohu-bibaho*', the writer Emdadul Huq started off with the natural sexual attraction between man and woman, and celebrated this '*lila*' (manifestation of God's creativity), which was socially harnessed and channelized into the production of offspring through the holy bond of matrimony. The distinctive feature of this article was that it provided a *historical* argument against polygamy, viz, apart from its ill effects on the creative, social and altruistic side of a human being, polygamy fell into disuse as societies advanced along the scale of human civilization. He commented:

> In Europe, Christian society sanctions monogamy; Muslim society sanctions polygamy (four wives) and in Hindu society Polygamy is not unknown. The rigid regulation of matrimonial law by the promulgation of monogamy testifies to the advanced state of European Civilization and the elevated taste of its denizens. But does that mean the norms and laws of marriage in our country become meaningless and futile ?[58]

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[57]Sheikh Jamiruddin, "Stree Jatir Proti Bhishon Atyachar", (Bengali), (Oppression toward the Female Race), *Islam Pracharok,* 5: 7-8, Srabon-Bhadro, 1310 BS

[58]Emdadul Huq, "Bohubibaho", (Bengali), (Polygamy), *Nabanur,* 3: 8, 343, Agrahayan 1312 BS

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In answer to this very topical question the writer outlined the original causes for allowing polygamy in Islam and the conditions under which it was allowed. The conclusion drawn was that the circumstances under which the Koran allowed polygamy existed no more and the conditions were well near impossible to meet. Therefore, the author argued that in actuality Islam favoured monogamy. He however proceeded to give a dainty twist to his argument whereby provisions for polygamy were seen as a beneficial safety-valve for a society in curbing adultery and licentiousness. Demographic factors (male female ratio), female sterility, excessive lust in some individuals, etc., were cited as rationale for sanctioning (conditional) polygamy. The writer did not hesitate to say that this special provision in fact protected Indian society from the licentiousness and loneliness that visited many men and women in the West. Polygamy according to him was better than adultery, fornication and illegitimate offspring. Thus were the tables turned and indigenous structures defended against a 'denigrating' and condescending 'Western' cultural outlook which condemned indigenous customs and values.

In the main, however, orthodox and liberal stands concurred at this point, on the issue of polygamy (as we have already seen and we shall see later on many other issues of reform in Muslim society: child marriage, women's education, erosion of *purdah*, women's rights, etc.). The conservative and liberal strands were both part of a broader reformist project. The omnipresent social critic Ismail Hussain Shirazi could not let the matter pass without writing on it. He declared that the most scientific marriage was one where bride and groom selected each other.[59] This type of selection was also sanctioned in Islam according to him. However, he also added that certain circumstances i.e. wife's sterility, or chronic illness,

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[59]Ismail Hossain Shirazi, "*Bibaha Niti*", (Bengali), (Principles of Marriage), *Al-Eslam*, 5:7,p. 382, Kartik 1326 BS.

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sometimes justified polygamy.

It is interesting to note that, during the early twentieth century, most instances in popular fictional literature (*Anowara, Swapnodrishta, Abdullah, Atmadan*) were those of monogamous couples, though co-wives were also portrayed. Some of the fictional pieces went so far as to paint the polygamous man as a hypocrite and lecher (details to follow: Chap. VII).

An issue that was closely linked to polygamy was concubinage, or the so-called *Bandi Protha*. In Bengali, *'Bandi'* literally means 'bonded females'. They were found in abundance in rich households. Rokeya's father Abu Ali Saber had four wives and several *bandi* according to Munshi Aftabuddin's *punthi, "Payraband Kahini"*, and Moshiuzzaman Saber's family history of Rokeya's ancestors.[60] According to the chroniclers, extravagance, luxury, and concubinage led to the fragmentation and final bankruptcy of the Saber zamindari. Rokeya writing much later never referred to these events. Emdadul Huq in the article referred to above condemned the custom of concubinage and said that those who claimed that it was an Islamic custom, were guilty of falsehood.

SEXUALITY

As early as the eighteenth century in Bengal there were various texts dealing exclusively with conjugal aspects of life, apart from chapters on the matter in the more comprehensive ones. In the relatively more 'frank' and less uninhibited atmosphere of the eighteenth century (as compared to the later *bhadrolok* puritanism of the later centuries), literary texts in

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[60]An account of both these previously unpublished manuscripts can be found in M. Shamsul Alam, *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein: Jiban O Sahitya*, (Bengali), (Life and work of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1989), where the writer claims that they are rich and accurate sources of a hitherto unknown arena of Rokeya's family history.

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Bengal would come in verse (*punthi*) form. A recent study[61] provides a list of such manuals dealing with various aspects of ethical and conjugal life. Syed Ghazi's *Rati Shastra* (Manual for Love) and Ainuddin's *Nikah Mongol* (Wedding Bliss) were eighteenth century treatises dealing with details of marriage and consummation. A striking feature in these was the tenderness and concern men were called upon to show in their relations with women. Several poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries composed works with the same titles, e.g., *Rati Shastra/Kam Shastra* (Love/Sex Manual) by Abdun Nabi, Monohar, Shah Ali and Manjila Khan. These *punthi* style tracts played an important role before the later prose works became popular. "Actually, the verse epics dealing with conjugal life were composed from the fundamental desire to beget healthy and meritorious children. Even if these manuals had no scientific or realistic basis, the populace's weakness for them is testified to by their very existence.[62]

Of the late nineteenth century instructional manuals, "Lajjatunnessa" (1897) by Ali Ahmed Arjan seems to have been popular, even though it was written "in prose full of coarse writing", as one commentator put it.[63] The book (which some interviewees remembered seeing in their early days) basically describes the different types of men and women mentioned in the "Kama Shastras" and remedies for the various diseases with a number of stories to illustrate the faithlessness of women. It seemed that the author was over-anxious to enlighten his (male) readers of the pleasures of sex as well as the latent dangers therein.

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[61] Khondkar Mozammel Huq, *Madhya Jugiyo Banglae Muslim Niti Shastra Katha*, (Bengali, Discourse on Ethics in Medieval Bengal), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1987)

[62] Khondker Mozammel Huq, ibid., p.230.

[63] Ali Ahmad, *Muslim Grontho Ponji*, (Bengali), (Bibliography of Muslim Books), (Bangla Academy Dhaka, 1985), p.228

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The world of temptation was often a stone's throw away from the home. In the case of the nobility many mansions had adjuncts where *tawaif* gave their song and dance performances to reclining lords. Often the performers would be kept on as mistresses in adjoining wings. Most elite families in the golden (and silver) days of the landed aristocracy, kept miniature *harems.* The Nawabs of Dhaka were reputed to marry several times; sometimes marriages were frequent, followed by divorces.They patronized the arts and the halls of stately mansions would resound with the sound of music on evenings of entertainment. The children heard stories of the 'escapades' of the male members but girls specially were very strictly brought up and sensuous living, if it were practiced at all , was something they would not know of.[64]

For some, there could be the ultimate *bahir*, the "kotha". It was a salon of the performers and prostitutes in separate neighbourhoods which could be found in big cities only, in imitation of imperial Lucknow, replete with its courtesans, refined culture and elegant living. (When Wajed Ali Shah left Lucknow, he was reported to have brought not only his harem, but a train of performers and musicians, to Calcutta.) The *kotha* often resembled a home, but was, more appropriately a subversion of it. This world of 'sin' was avidly denounced by the reformist standard as decadent forms of the unreconstructed '*sharif* culture' which should not figure in the horizon of the new Muslim generation. Such decadence was condemned both by the anti-west reformists who longed for the pristine glory of Islam, and the pro-west liberals who desired a new order of things.

The influential poet Hali engaged in his reformist project of weeding out such decadent practises referred in his *Majalis un-nissa* to the (negative) role of courtesans in the lives of *sharif* nineteenth century men.

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[64]Interview with Mrs Sarwar Khan, great grandchild of Nawab Ahsanullah.

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Hali implied that men visited the courtesans out of their need for refined companionship. He resorted to typical Victorian style euphemism:

> You should consider the man a thirsty traveller and the woman a spring. If the spring happens to be at the bottom of a tree and there is greenery all around, then the traveller after quenching his thirst will want to spend several hours enjoying the environment. There may be plenty of other springs where he would simply quench his thirst and go his way.[65]

Gail Minault, authoritative translator of Hali, interprets this passage thus:

> If middle class wives are literate and cultivated—traditionally the role reserved for courtesans—men will be saved from dissolute lives. ...Hali argues that there will be no further need for courtesans but a tremendous increase in morality if wives replace courtesans in their husbands' affections.[66]

As we shall see in the chapter on education (Chap. IV), this argument was also used on occasion by Bengali women.

Courtesans[67] were traditionally an affair of the rich. For those of lesser means there were ordinary prostitutes.[68] In this regard, *bhadro* attitude was very condemnatory - and yet it is now accepted that in the flourishing Calcutta of the nineteenth century - prostitution made encroachments everywhere - into the "haat and bazaar" (everyday marketplace)

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[65]Altaf Hussain Hali, "Majalis un-nissa," in Gail Minault (ed) *Voices of Silence*, (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1986), p.63.

[66]Gail Minault, ibid. p.20.

[67]For an insightful account of courtesan lifestyle and such subversion, see Veena Talwar Oldenberg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Courtesans of Lucknow" in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds), *Contesting Power Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[68]For a distinction between courtesans and prostitutes, see Veena Talwar Oldenberg, ibid.

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as the saying went.[69]

Ibrahim Khan in his memoir wrote about prostitutes in the little town he lived in under a section titled '*Barbonita*':

> In those days there were brothels next to almost all market places, river ports and bazars. *Zamindars* and *talukdars* encouraged this as a source of revenue... sometimes for personal reasons. Young men from the middle class, well to do families of the countryside would frequent those areas and sometimes bring the women home as wives.[70]

Sexuality in Islamic Ideology

The Islamic discourse on sexuality had been formulated over centuries in several classical texts which included Bukhari's *Al-Jami al-Sahih* (taught in the Bengal Muslim seminaries, and revered in many homes, popularly referred to as the *Sahih Hadith*); Tarmidi's *Sunan al-Tarmidi*, Muslim's *Al Jami al-Sahih*, Malik's *Al-Muwatta* and Imam Ghazzali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*.

The text which Fatima Mernissi draws upon and uses extensively in her widely acclaimed exposition of sexuality in Islam, is Ghazzali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din* (The Revivification of the Religious Sciences, translation published from Cairo in 1306-1312 Hijri). Ghazzali (1050-1111), known as Algazel in the West, was a prolific theoretician, historian and jurist. His *Kimiyae Sadat*, written in Persian to give in brief the main substance of the *Ihya*, was translated into Bengali in the 1890s as *Saubhagya Sparshamani* (Touchstone of Good Fortune) which became popular fare both among lay and cleric. The *Ihya* contained a discourse and exposition of sexuality in such exhaustive

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[69]For a contemporary's account of prostitution and the lifestyle of the new '*babus*' and '*bibis*' in the 19th century, see Bhavanicharan Banerjee, *Kalikata Kamalalay* (1823), *Nababahu-bilas* (1825), and *Nababibi-bilas* (1831), in *Rasarachana Samagra*, (Calcutta: Nabapatra Prakashan, 1987)

[70]Ibrahim Khan, pp. 94-95.

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detail that it could very well have made Sigmund Freud a trifle envious:

> The implicit theory, driven far into the Muslim unconscious, is epitomized in Imam Ghazzali's classical work. He sees civilization as struggling to contain women's destructive, all absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties...The whole Muslim organization of social interaction and spacial configuration can be understood in terms of women's *qaid* power. The social order then appears as an attempt to subjugate her power and neutralize its disruptive effects.[71]

In contrast to the passive, frigid Freudian female, Imam Ghazzali's portrayal of the female would have appeared truly 'progressive' had it not been for the manner in which this energy was viewed and interpreted. The Ghazzalian theory at first sight appeared favourable to women in that it acknowledged women's sexuality, but it also contained a turning of the argument which invested the sexuality with a negative force capable of destroying the social order by unleashing chaos (fitna). Man, the passive agent presumably had little role to play. The Ghazzalian theory could then go on to directly link the security of the social order to the woman's virtue/chastity. This chastity would have to be ensured by the satisfaction of a woman's sexual needs through the regulated and legitimate channel of marriage Social order could be secured only where the woman limited herself to her husband, and was contained. Thus regulation of women's sexuality assumed a centrality in Ghazzali. A girl should be married at the first sign of sexual awakening, and henceforth her satisfaction and contentment became a sacred duty for the husband.

Ghazzali's work and other classics were the texts on which Islamic discourses in Bengal were partly based. Influences filtering in for countless

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[71]Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, pp. 32-33.

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ages from far away Mecca, Medina, Baghdad, Cairo or Tehran, mingled with indigenous thought and practice to create the premises on which the Bengal Muslim's spiritual and ideological edifices were erected.

Notwithstanding the detailed sexological treatises which were available to Muslim men, women's exposure and reaction seems to be a mystery. The *andarmahal* was the domain of legitimate sexuality, unlike the public space, the *bahir*, where anything could happen. With "its preoccupation with virginity, marriage and childbirth the atmosphere of the Zenana was a singularly chaste place."[72] Contact between husband and wife was limited to the night-time. There would be very little scope for contact with other males in a conservative household and only the very daring managed to strike up a liaison with anyone. Any casual contact with the opposite sex could be titillating. Brijbhushan suggests that such a sequestered world seemed ripe ground for lesbianism but the open living (communal bedroom) for those not with their husbands in the Zenana combined with rigid sexual codes did not provide scope for alternate relationships.

INHERITANCE

Some of the concerns of the Hindu reform movement, led by men such as Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar, did not affect the Muslim community. For in theory, if not always in practice, Muslim women enjoyed several of the rights Hindu and Brahmo reformers were agitating for. In the first place, Muslim women could remarry, whether widowed or divorced. They could even ask for a divorce from their husbands (though under certain circumstances). They could own property and in fact were supposed to inherit a portion of their father's, husband's or son's wealth. And lastly, *sati* was not a Muslim practice.

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[72]Jamila Brijbhusan, *Muslim Women in Purdah and Out of it* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980) p.34.

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When women's reform started to gain ground, advocates of Islam were quick to point out that it was the religion which had granted women the right to inherit and own property. The Islamic Law of Inheritance is quite detailed and complex.[73] Broadly speaking, a daughter would inherit from her father one-half of what a son would get, a wife could claim one-eighth of her deceased husband's property and one-sixth of a deceased child's property.

Elite women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did come into their own inheritance in many cases. Munno Jan Begum (sister of Haji Mohammad Mohsin) was the actual owner of the vast ancestral estates. She administered them efficiently and bequeathed them to her brother in the understanding that the revenue would be used to set up a beneficial fund. Nawab Faizunnessa inherited that part of the property which went to her as a daughter under Islamic law. Her brothers got the rest. But Faizunnessa's estates were large. (In a society where women of the upper class could not seek employment outside the home, inheritance could be a major source of power in both the public and private spheres).

Not many women were as fortunate as Munno Jan or Faizunnessa. There were many instances where women were cheated out of their inheritance. Rokeya herself was turned out of the house, so to speak, sometime after her husband's death. She took refuge in Calcutta shortly after, in 1911. Nurunnessa in her novel *Atmadan* based on the story of her mother's life (1925) has left behind an account of how her mother had been swindled out of all her property after she became a widow.

Publicists, in their efforts to prove that Islam had given women high status, used women's property rights as a mainstay in their argument.

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[73]See Asaf Fyzee, *Outlines of Muhammadan Law*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974)

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They cited Koranic passages, particularly "Sura Nesa" to substantiate the point. In an article on the rights of women published in *Al-Eslam*, in 1915, the writer cited from the above:

> It has been said in Sura Nesa regarding women's rights to wealth and property - 'Women have ownership over that which they have earned.' The Sura further establishes women's claims in the property of parents and other relatives.[74]

In its previous issue, Al-Eslam had printed a similar article under the title "Eslame Narir Samman" (Dignity of Women in Islam) which was actually a Bengali translation of an article 'The Cause of Women Vindicated by Islam' published in a periodical called *Islamic Review and Muslim India*. The piece compared the status of women in the major world religions - and concluded that Islam fared the best in the matter. *Sura Nesa* was invoked again and the writer pointed out that women have a share in parental or familial property along with men, be that large or small.

But there was no consensus as to how far were these rights translated into reality. Rokeya who believed these rights were eroded wrote in her essay 'Griha':

> According to 'Mohammadan law' we inherit our fathers' wealth - we even manage to get a 'home'. But the *actual* owners are always the husband, son, son-in-law, brother-in-law, etc... Who does not know the base means that are used to deprive women of their paternal inheritance?... Men will keep silent. We have to speak out ourselves.[75]

Rokeya then enumerated all the measures cunningly adopted to deprive

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[74] *Al-Eslam*, '*Islame Nari Jatir Swattaadhikar*', (Bengali), (Rights of women in Islam), 1: 8, 504, Agrahayan, 1322 BS.

[75] Rokeya S. Hossein, "Griha", (Bengali), (Home), *Nabanur*, 2:5, 243, Ashwin 1311 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

women of their rightful shares. She reiterated the sentiment in her other essays. Judging by the reformer's repetition of Koranic rights granted to women and the need to restore them, one may assume that these rights had indeed become eroded (popular tracts even urged women to renounce the *mohr*, the one last asset remaining to them). Whatever those who were content with the existing order of things might have felt, relentless social critics like Rokeya felt no twinge in proclaiming that Islamic rights granted to women were no longer in force. Mrs M. Rahman also drew attention to the erosion of women's rights and their economic helplessness in a vein similar to Rokeya's.

THE *GHAR* AND THE *BAHIR*

The separation of the public and private spheres of the was expressed aptly in the Bengali dichotomy of *ghar* and *bahir*. Where the *andar barhi /bahir barhi* or *andarmahal/sadarmahal* denoted physical places of abode, the *ghar/bahir* was a set of concepts denoting the sphere of women the home, and the sphere of men, the world. The concept of *ghar* (*andar*) and *bahir* continued well into the 20th century. Writers male and female, testify to this. The highly popular social novels of the time e.g., *Abdullah, Anwara, Zobeda, Goriber Meye* (not to mention the Urdu novels that were also popular fare in may homes at the time), were written against this background. Ibrahim Khan in his autobiography, painted a picture of social and familial life of Muslim society in transition from the turn to the middle of the twentieth century. His accounts of early childhood set amidst a semirural environment clearly depict the rotation of life around an *andar-bahir* axis.

However, all the important female personalities we are here concerned with had to cross this *andar-bahir* boundary several times in their life. The life of Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, the author of *Rupjalal*, was an extraordinary transcenscion of the boundary set down by this separation.

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The unusual and gifted lady separated from her husband, returned to her ancestral home in Pashchimgaon (near Comilla), and it was during this phase that she lived a life, very unusual for a Muslim lady of her time. "After breakfast she would go to the estate office, where she would first dispense with the *musafir-khana* (guest house) accounts and then take up the estate records."[76] All this would of course be conducted behind a screen or *purdah* in keeping with the custom of female seclusion:

> After disposing off with the various officials Faizunnessa would return to the *andar*. Here she would bathe in the private pond surrounded by walls. After lunch, a brief rest, and some more office work, she would retire to the privacy of her very own 'Faizun library'. The remainder of the day would be devoted to prayer.[77]

One is here presented with the picture of a woman who had the right to make the daily transition from *andar* to the *bahir*, traversing everyday the private and the public domains. The woman who apparently transcended the *andar*, did not really have to operate within the conventional framework of the patriarchal family. It is essential here to remember that, firstly, Faizunnessa belonged to the elite and, secondly, she had no family, so to speak, when she took over the management of her inherited estates.

Ideally man had suzerainty over the public world and women over the private. But as happens in all patriarchal societies, man was the ultimate master in his castle as well. Shaista, however, felt that women enjoyed considerable power:

> Actually women in Muslim households invariably had great influence and a much greater say in household affairs than their menfolk.

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[76]Mohammad Abdul Quddus, Intro., *Rupjalal* by Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, (first publ. 1876, reprnt. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1984), p.x.

[77]Quddus, ibid., p. XII-XIII

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

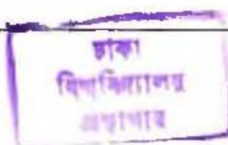
> The fact that they observed *purdah* did not mean they were non-entities, though I know this is the general impression in the west, and like many other impressions, it is an erroneous one.[78]

This was Shaista's conclusion of power in the Muslim household as she had observed it. Other commentators would disagree. For instance, Urquhart stated: "It is often said that behind the parda the power of woman is supreme. But this in so far as it is true, applies chiefly to women who happen to be heads of households."[79] The author added that in a large family there would be a few who experienced power and several who might never experience any at all. The power of a wife would be restricted to control over children and perhaps a certain influence over the husband.

In this regard, responses of women interviewees (born approximately around 1915-25) varied somewhat, but most seemed to concur that their mothers and grandmothers led happy lives though actual power resided with the men of the household. Although the overlord sometimes abided by the mistress's decisions cheerfully or grudgingly, he could in the end override all of them. In fact the happiness stemmed partly from an acceptance of the ideology of male supremacy in all spheres. An interviewee said: "Mother had no decision making power. Father was the all in all. But one thing my mother insisted on and that was my education".[80]

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein had her own formulation on power in the household. In her various essays where she propounded her theory of feminism, Rokeya ruthlessly illustrated that women have been disempowered throughout history in the home and outside it, till they have been reduced to the status of domestic slaves. She substantiated her point with cases

[78]Ikramullah, p. 66.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[79]Urquhart, p.42.

[80]Interview: M. Islam.

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from the Bengal Muslim Community in which she lived out her life. In '*Griha*' (Home), Rokeya drew the breathtaking conclusion that as women do not have any genuine power, or ownership of the house and its assets, women are in fact 'homeless'. It must be remembered, however, that while other writers were writing autobiographies or memoirs, Rokeya was formulating a relentless theory of women's subordination.

On many occasions women of the prior generation whose lives had been lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and whose daughters were to emerge as the future Muslim *bhadromohila*, sensed the change in the air and passionately stood their ground regarding their daughters' education. In several cases it might have been a mother's dying wish extracted from male family members at the deathbed. Often guardians married off their young but talented daughters after being assured that the groom would see to the bride's education. This happened in the cases of Shamsunahar Mahmud (1908-1964) who went on to do her M. A., and Fatema Sadeq(b. 1918) who went on to do her PhD.

In the pre-modern period the *andarmahal* was the centre around which a woman's entire life revolved. She spent her childhood within its walls; her training and education for the future role of wife and mother were received there; after marriage, sometime around the onset of puberty, she left for a similar establishment; there she gave birth and raised children and ran a house if she were a senior daughter in-law. And there she breathed her last. Her life may seem confined and constricted by later day reformist standards, but to many life within the *andar* must have been full and with its own meaning and significance.

As the social and economic structure changed and greater number of Muslims started to enter the government service, the familial and residential pattern also assumed new forms among the middle class. A simple cor-

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relation was discernible between the women who first came out of purdah and participated in some measure in public life and the transferrable jobs taken on by the new liberal and educated Muslim men. A similar breakdown in the familial and residential pattern occurred in the case of the first Brahmo public Hindu women whose roles were changed by dint of access to public life.

In the new nuclear family, where the wife would accompany the husband at his new posting taking up residence in English-style houses in burgeoning towns or remote spots, the old pattern of life gave way to new spatial and conceptual arrangements, different from those of the *andarmahal.* Perhaps it was more important now to have a drawing room or dining room for receiving visitors. The new term '*hall-ghar*' (a composite word coined from the English 'hall' and the Bengali '*ghar*'), which was in vogue during the early part of the twentieth century, captured the essence of this change.

The disempowered and decadent Muslim polity, now awakened with new stirrings of life, was compelled to turn its gaze to the sphere of the home - the *andarmahal* as one of the terrains of its renewal and empowerment. But the sight that met its gaze - the dim and remote *andarmahal* - which they now perceived as a repository of ignorance and weakness, was not going to serve them in their reformist projects. Traditional ways of life, as manifest in the joint-family system and the family relationships that went with it, and the existing structures — such as polygamy, concubinage and child marriage — were all in need of reformation. The custodian of the home would have to now step into a new role in changed circumstances. The *andar* with its denizens would have to be refashioned to create the new home.

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CHAPTER III
THE FAMILY IN TRANSITION

Narratives that have come down to us from the early part of this century illustrate the changes that were taking place in the institution of the traditional family. Deep rooted economic factors had brought the Muslim middle class into being.[1] Administrative and educational changes led to the rise of the professional gentry, a phenomenon which affected family structures greatly.

In the sphere of the family the changes were articulated through the rise of a new domestic ideology and structural re-arrangements in forms of marriage, divorce, age at marriage, etc. Margaret Urquhart's *Women of Bengal* recorded many of these changes as she perceived them when she observed that present day influences were combining to disrupt the joint responsibility and sharing of the family home:

> The industrial expansion due to the British expansion and to the establishment of larger relations with the rest of the world; the need for offices to carry on the administration, the opening up of professional careers in law, medicine, teaching, etc., have changed the poverty-stricken landowner into a bourgeois city population, which has not yet adapted comfortably to the new order of things.[2]

Urquhart used the term *bhadrolok* (Bengali gentleman) for the contender in this new order who due to increased competition for employment, began

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[1]For a history of the middle class, see B. B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961)

[2]Urquhart, p.36

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to engage in trade and took up a *chakri* (salaried job) with the government or "other employers less august".

Autobiographical works like Mir Mosharraf's *Amar Jibani* and *Gazi Miar Bostani* and social novels of the period such as *Abdullah* and *Anowara* reflected the process of professional transformation in Muslim society. These texts depicted the transition from land-owning to salaried jobs and the resistance to this change. The transformation quickened as sons began to leave the ancestral home to seek education and employment in cities such as Dhaka and Calcutta. As the new generation settled in towns the wife left behind in the village or moffusil, started to join the husband in the city or far-off posting in a distant place when she reached a suitable age. In this regard Borthwick observes: "...closeness in the new family patterns was encouraged by the British administrative practice of sending government officials out to the moffusil".[3]

The young wife found herself alone, mistress of a house, companion to her husband and free from the authority of the mother-in-law. It was a new role, requiring new skills and attitudes which now came to be defined and dictated by a new domestic philosophy.

THE RISE OF DOMESTIC IDEOLOGY

England's dominion overseas often imported ideologies from abroad as a consequence of its forced cultural encounter with the West. Ever since Macaulay's famous Minute proclaiming the necessity for creating a class of people "Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinion and morals", the process of hegemonic acculturation had accelerated. The *bhadrolok* --Indians who had received western education and imbibed the post-enlightenment spirit of Europe to some measure-- started to refashion

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[3] Borthwick, pp. 121-122

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their own traditional values and social structures.

Liberal ideologies imported from the West underwent a sea change and assumed hybrid forms in their journey eastward. One of the strong influences in the cultural sphere of the *bhadro* community in Bengal was that exerted by the rise of a new form of domestic ideology in Victorian England (1837 - 1901) which produced the Perfect Lady.[4] She was the new, middle class woman, wife, mother, helpmeet and companion, mistress of the private sphere, submissive appendage to the modern male breadwinner.

The new model of femininity held considerable sway in England from about the time of Queen Victoria's ascension in 1837 until the 1870s. It was based upon a new concept of woman's innate nature, as fragile, pure and tender. Along with theories of separation and complementarity of spheres, it was a component element of a new domestic ideology that dominated Victorian England. After the French Revolution of 1789, the English middle class deeply anxious about the stability of their own society felt that one of the chief ways of ensuring social stability would be to strengthen the idea and role of the bourgeois family - "male bread-winner, dependent home-based, wife and children."[5]

The pre-industrial family where all members contributed in some measure to the productive process and hence the family income, had broken down and given way to the new version which separated human social existence into two spheres the home and the outside, the private and

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[4]For a history of this phenomenon, see Martha Vicinus (ed.) *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, (London: Methuen, 1980); Martha Vicinus (ed.) *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); and Catherine Hall, *The Early Formation of the Victorian Domestic Ideology*, (London: Croom Helm, 1979)

[5]Deirdre Beddoe, *Discovering Women's History*, (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1987), p.20

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public. Prior to this the feminine ideal had been the *Perfect Wife* who had been an active participant in the family, fulfilling a number of vital tasks. In the lower classes she had contributed to the family income; in the middle classes she had provided economic support by caring for children, purchasing and preparing food, etc. But in a changed cultural and economic milieu the model gave way to an ideal which had little connection with "any functional and responsible role in society."[6]

Publicists and poets contributed much to the development of domestic ideology by articulating discourses on the separation and complementarity of spheres (Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, 1865, Tennyson's *The Princess*, 1847) and the submissive nature of woman (Sarah Ellis, Ruskin, Tennyson). A girl was now trained to imbibe the above ideas — she believed a woman's world was in the home:

> In her most perfect form the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth.[7]

Her education and training were designed to bring out her 'natural submission' to authority, and innate maternal instincts. Mrs. Sarah Stickney Ellis, best selling writer and 'mid century pundit' wrote:

> As women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men - inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are in bodily strength.[8]

Ruskin's versions of girls as flowers to be picked was the norm, and Mill's marriage between equal partners was the exception.[9]

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[6]Vicinus, *Suffer*, p.ix.

[7]Vicinus, *Suffer*, Introduction, p.ix

[8]Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England*, London 1845, p.11, cited by Beddoe, p.21

[9]See Ruskin's *Sesames and Lilies*, for the norm in gender relations of 19th Century England; and John Stuart Mill's, *The Subjection of Women* for

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One important point of dissimilarity between the ideal prescribed in Victorian (later also in Edwardian, 1901-1910) England and colonial India was the attitude to marital sex. As noted before, the Muslim manuals had elaborate chapters on sexual duties of males and females. Sex was a matter of joy and matrimony, ideally, was supposed to provide sexual fulfillment for both partners. Therefore girls/wives were enjoined to tempt, to please, to participate (if possible), and above all to satisfy their husbands. The Victorian ideal of the 'passive' female partner was not upheld, or approved of. But as the *bhadromohila* ideal spread, *bhadro*/Victorian 'puritanism' also gained ground.

The message of the perfect lady in England and her pivotal role in the domestic sphere, were widely publicized from the pulpit, in religious tracts and popular manuals, in popular literature and art forms, in the streets and business places, in schools and social centres.

However, like all stereotypes/ideals, it would be difficult to locate the perfect lady in concrete terms. A prescribed ideal of womanhood was one thing, the humdrum reality of daily life, another. It was difficult to find a woman who was idle, innocent, childlike, and lived off the money provided by the male breadwinner to create the sanctuary of home. But even among the upper classes scholars[10] who have examined the economic realities of middle class existence argued that there was little scope for these families to employ a legion of servants and for the wife to remain idle and indisposed.

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a brilliant counter to the norm. Rokeya Sakhawat's writings were close to Ruskin's when she was trying to popularize her agenda for reform e.g. her school; they sounded like Mill's when she was formulating her theory of female bondage and emancipation.

[10] See, for example, Patricia Branca, *Image and Reality: The Myth of the Ideal Victorian Woman*, in Hartmann and Banner (eds.), *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, (New York: Harper, 1974).

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The importance of the ideal then was in the normative or prescriptive power it had among the middle class women who represented it, the working class women who emulated it and the upper class who exemplified it. In real life what one could expect to find was a diluted version of the Perfect Lady cum Good Wife, who though she could not afford idleness, could be respectable, chaste and virtuous.

> It is incidentally in this diluted version or this imperfect copy of the Perfect Lady that one sees the prototype of the later housewife, and in this legacy the Perfect Lady was to continue to exert influence.[11]

The Perfect Lady as an ideal or stereotype soon had to make room for a new model, the 'perfect woman' or "...The new woman who continued to hold chastity as an ideal but made it equally applicable to men as to women."[12] More importantly, through a variety of economic and social changes her sphere of action became greatly enlarged.

The transition in the mode of the family in nineteenth century Bengal, first among the Hindu/Brahmo community and then the Muslim, may be viewed as a movement from the *andarmahal/antahpur* to the '*griha*'.

As observed by Himani Banerjee:

> The two central themes in this context are the familial social space designated as 'andarmahal/antahpur'(inner quarters) and 'griha' (home/household) and the main creator-organizer of this space, who is named in the latter half of the century as 'grihini'(the mistress of the home/home-maker) especially in her incarnation of bhadra-mahila as mother... the newness of the concept of griha (now) and its difference from andar (then) stare us in the face...This andar/antahpur which indicates a social domain in women's care,

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[11]Beddoe, ibid., p.27

[12]Beddoe, ibid.

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> which is the constant inhabitat of women, children, domestic servants and the nocturnal habitat of adult males, can only be understood in its specificity when contrasted with griha.[13]

From the 1850s onwards, Bengal's most eminent social reformers the Brahmos, deemed improving the condition of women a central feature of their reformist programme. In this they were considerably affected by the culture and values of the Victorian/Edwardian eras based on the political, philosophical and economic tenets of Liberalism, Unitarianism and Utilitarianism. Their most renowned reformer Keshub Chandra Sen "had been profoundly influenced by Victorian ideas of social reform, which had reached him through correspondence with English Unitarians, contact with English administrators in India and a visit to England."[14]

In 1863 Keshub's followers established the *Bama Bodhini Sabha* for Brahmo women which brought out the *Bama Bodhini Patrika* till the 1920s. After a major split in the Brahmo Samaj in 1878 Keshub continued to redefine the traditional Hindu ideals of womanhood in accordance with middle class Victorian values. The rise of the new domestic ideology with its emphasis on companionship, love, efficient household management, and separation of private and public spheres, was first articulated in the Brahmo community. The new ideology in its Bengali context, helped shape the contour of the new family and the personality of the *bhadromohila* into whose hand the care of the family was entrusted. The Brahmo/Hindu *bhadromohila* in her turn served as a model for the later Muslim *bhadromohila*. When the new generation of Bengal Muslims came upon the scene they found a model of women's reform already in existence.

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[13]Himani Banerjee, "Fashioning a Self-Educational Proposals for and by Women in Popular Magazines in Colonial Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Oct. 26 1991, p.53

[14]Borthwick, p.50

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In the early twentieth century the conservatives referred to this new generation disapprovingly as the Mill-Bentham addicted "Nabya Muslim Sampraday"[15] (community of New Muslims) who played a pivotal role in the making of the new Muslim gentlewoman.

The 'new woman cum perfect lady' viz the women of colonial India who felt the first full brunt of 'modernization'[16] sought education, creative expression (through writing), a meaningful role outside the home-bound one, and fought for legal and political rights. Economic independence *per se* was not part of their agenda initially. Where women of England in the Edwardian age could if she desired, seek some form of employment outside the home, for Bengali women it was not an option in the early part of the twentieth century (though working class women were employed in jute mills at the time). This, despite the fact that Indian women were participating in the anti-colonial struggle. Women were seen in large numbers in public rallies, demonstrations, protests and marches; but there was neither opportunity nor ideological sanction for women of the middle class to seek employment in the early decades of the twentieth century.

For many middle class women of Victorian and Edwardian England, marriage was the most attractive option. For Indian women it was the only one. As our discussions in the following sections will show, the new domestic ideology of this period celebrated woman as homemaker, mother and companion, not as an unseemly wage-earner.

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[15]See Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samayik potre*, (section on "Nabya Samaj"), pp.67-74.

[16]If one takes a loose, wide view of it, the process of modernization and emancipation can be said to have continued approximately from 1850 to 1940. Bethune school for girls was established in 1849; Lady Brabourne College (for Muslim girls mostly) was founded in 1939.

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The Auspicious Homemaker: *Kalyani* or *Grihalakshmi*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) composed *Kalyani* in 1900, his tribute to woman the auspicious homemaker:

> In your secluded home amid verdant groves
> You go about your daily tasks
> Outside the cuckoo calls...
> Within, the infant babbles in mirth.
> My final song is set aside for thee.
> Beautiful maids lay offerings at your feet
> Wise ones string garlands for you.
> For you there is neither winter, nor spring, nor age, nor youth...
> Your lamp never dies, your flower blooms eternally.[17]

Several decades earlier in England, Coventry Patmore had composed "The Angel in the House" which had given the stereotype of the ideal Victorian woman her name. In spirit, the closest approximation to 'The Angel in the House' would have been the image of the *Grihalakshmi* — the goddess of fortune domesticated.[18]

Tagore in the poem 'Sonar Bandhon' - Bonds of Gold (1892) had in fact eulogized the ideal "chained in sweet affection, *Grihalakshmi*, in the humble meagre, abodes of men...". bringing light and love, etc. Patmore's poem reflected similar sentiments.

The concept of *Kalyani* or *Grihalakshmi* epitomized the woman as provider of bounty, the homemaker, mother, guardian of the sacred hearth, companion in the vicissitudes of life, protector of the family fortunes - a 'divine' woman given human and domestic form. But unlike Victorian Eng-

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[17]Rabindranath Tagore, *Sanchayita* (Bengali) (Anthology), (Calcutta: Viswabharati, 1975), p.428. (translation mine).

[18]A recent scholar also selected *Grihalakshmi* as the equivalent to the Angel. See Humayun Azad, *Nari*, (Dhaka: Nadi, 1992), p.98-99.

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land, there were other powerful images of women in Bengal (no, not the temptress) — the goddesses Kali and Durga, for example. By the late nineteenth century both had been conjured up to provide images of empowered womanhood. But it was the abstract concepts of *Kalyani* and *Grihalakshmi*, which the Muslim accepted for the mother goddesses, could not be part and parcel of a culture that emphasized strict monotheism and non-idolatry. Divested of anthropomorphic elements, *Kalyani* or *Grihalakshmi* was a figure the Muslim intelligentsia could idealize. Victorian England had its 'Angel in the House' and Bengal had its 'Grihalakshmi'.

One of the earliest expositions of the *Kalyani* ideal in Muslim society was by Mir Mosharraf Hossain in *Bibi Kulsum* (1910). Born in a conservative family, Mir had yet imbibed some of the spirit of the Bengal Awakening:

> He had seen woman treated as a commodity and abandoned at end of use... But Mosharraf Hossain celebrated the glory of woman as mother as well as beloved partner in his life, and also in his autobiographies...He shared Tagore's notion of the *kalyani.*[19]

Tenderness, care, learning, love, bounty - he saw all these in his ideal woman personified in Kulsum - drawn along the lines of the image Tagore immortalized in Kalyani.

An article in *Al-Eslam*, in 1919, celebrated the *Grihalakshmi* and denigrated the 'modern' woman:

> Of late, those self styled 'educated' women who awake late in the day with biscuit and tea in hand, who while their time all day on an easy chair, novel in hand, or in front of their mirror or their wardrobe, who have no patience with household chores, in-laws or guests, who like to gad about in public instead of being satisfied in the home - whatever they may be called they are certainly not

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[19]See Kazi Abdul Mannan's Introduction to *Mir Mosharraf Hossain Rachanabali*, (Bengali) (Collected works of Mir Mosharraf Hossain), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1985), p.85.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> the *Grihalakshmi*... of the Muslim home. On the other hand those who reside as veritable images of *Lakshmi* in the house bringing upon it good fortune like their forebears Bibi Fatema and Hajera, cooking with own hands and feeding husband, in laws, children, - these pious women deserve the title *Grihalakshmi*.[20]

Novels (like Najibur Rahman's *Goriber Meye, Anowara*) also favoured the term to describe their domesticated heroines.

Coming down to brass tasks, *Kalyani* had to create the sanctuary of home where the drama of every day life in all its mundane details could be played out. The fairy had to start frying the fish - or as Azad puts it - '*manos sundarir machh kota*'[21]. Contemporary journals and manuals instructed her on how to go about this. As a single source book Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Behesti Zewar* must have been the most comprehensive. It included chapters on cooking, nutrition, essential medicine, nursing, etiquette, child-care, making pickles, etc. Popular periodicals had women's corner' type sections replete with instructions on the fine art of home-making. There were 'tips corner' columns to refresh the housewife's memory every now and then.

Lutfur Rahman, renowned for his social reform programme, was the author of one such 'tips to the housewife' article. In the Jaistha (1336 BS) issue of *Mohammadi*, he compiled a list of habits for women to avoid which included: Sleeping late; fighting with maids first thing in the morning; misplacing the *bodna* (water mug); pretending to have hysteria anytime; opposing husband's will; sighing without reason; shunning books, etc.[22]

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[20]Sheikh Abdur Rahim, 'Shikshar Bhitti', (Bengali) (The Basis of Education), *Al Eslam*, 5:7, 390, Kartik, 1326 BS.

[21]See Azad, *Nari*, p.99.

[22]Dr. Lutfur Rahman, "*Nari O Pratidiner Sangsarik Jivan*",(Women and everyday domestic life), *M. Mohammadi*, 3:8,623-24, Jaishtha 1336 BS

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Separation of Spheres

In Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Mr Wemmick physically ritualized the separation of spheres every evening on returning home from his work-place, by lifting up the drawbridge that separated his abode from the out-side world. Dickens might have been indulging in a little satire, but Ruskin and Tennyson were in earnest when they were projecting the idea of separation of spheres and an innate, feminine nature of women, etc. in their works. Both writers, one as an essayist, the other as a poet, buttressed the concepts of separation of spheres and the 'nature of women'.

Corresponding to this was the dichotomous Bengali notion of *ghar* and *bahir* which gained much currency in the late nineteenth century. To an educated Bengali of the time, the *Grihalakshmi* was guardian of the *ghar*; and she along with the *Manos Sundari/Priya* embodied the ideal of femininity innate in nature. These concepts were also crafted on to the literary works in Bengali writers. One of Tagore's famous novels was titled *Ghare Baire* (1916) translated into English as 'The Home and the World'. Earlier in his essay "Prachya O Pratichya" (1891), he had set clear boundaries between the world of women and men:

> Woman is the centripetal [sic] force in society. This force is not being able to combat centrifugal ones in that it is not exerting enough of a pull inward.... Consequently, woman's empire is shrinking.[23]

Commenting on the sharpness of the new division, Borthwick writes:

> ...Employment under British rule accentuated a sharp division between work and home... a division less marked in Hindu society. The leisurely and cultured atmosphere of Mughal administration was

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[23]Rabindranath Tagore, "Prachya O Pratichya" in *Rabindra Rachanabali Vol XII*, (Calcutta: Viswabharati, 1349 BS), p.237.

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> more harmonious than was the separation of home and work in Victorian England, where the two were so distinct that it was to provide a counter balance between the tensions associated with work.[24]

True, upper-class women had always lived in the *Antahpur* in Bengal. But with the rise of the middle class the spatial demarcation came to be defined in a new way. As the andar-bahir demarcation became more distinct and assumed more significance — there was a simultaneous transcendence of barriers as 'women' stepped over from the home into the world. This is exactly what Tagore's heroine Bimala in *Ghare Baire* did do, with the help of her husband, of course. Tagore articulated the 'Separation of Spheres' in his essays also; he used the analogies borrowed from Newtonian Science, perhaps in keeping with the fashion of the day: Woman was the centripetal force in society; centrifugal forces from outside were draining the strength of the interior.

Tagore views on women, womanhood, women's role, gender relations were always complex, many-faceted and evolving. The Tagore who could hail woman as the 'Grihalakshmi/Kalyani' could also make his heroine Mrinal in *Strir Patro* renounce home and hearth. In many poems written toward the end of his life, he set clear limits to the hegemony of domestic ideology.

The theory of separation of spheres exerted a strong influence on the Muslim mind also. In 1926, Kasema Khatun in her second installment of 'Narir Kotha' dwelt on the topic at some length. She started with a quotation from the Persian sage Sadi who had stated that man and woman were two limbs from the same body. The parity, health and harmony of both were essential for happy family life. Following this Kasema in the third instalment of her essay on women, wrote:

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[24]Borthwick, pp.115-116

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> The human world of action is divided into two spheres — the external and the internal. In the main, man rules in the outside world, and women in the internal one.[25]

Kasema also lamented the ignorance of uneducated wives which hindered the husband's career.In fact, she was building a case for female education on the basis of a woman's responsibility as a wife and partner. One is reminded of Sarah Stickney Ellis.

Motherhood

In Colonial Bengal motherhood was one of the most important ingredients of domestic ideology. The notion of motherhood was also the aspect which displayed more indigenous characteristics than the notion of companionship which was influenced by Victorian ideals. Motherhood was a topic over which there was much consensus among old fashioned and modern, men and women, Hindu, Muslim or Brahmo.

The principle of female energy embodied in the mother-goddesses, *Durga* and *Kali*, had always been revered in Bengal. The tide of nationalism toward the end of the late nineteenth century had co-opted the women's movement into the anti-colonial struggle and recast ideal womanhood in terms of the powerful mother goddess as well as the acquiescent *Sita-Savitri-Sati*.

Hindu 'revivalism' of the brand preached by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had become a common facet of the nationalist struggle, and one of the powerful ideological symbols or images invoked by him was that of the motherland sanctified to represent the mother-goddess.[26]

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[25] Kasema Khatun, "Narir Kotha", (Bengali), (Words of Women), *Saogat*, 4:5, 347, Kartik 1333 BS

[26] For an analytical treatment of this topic see Jashodhara Bagchi, "Representing nationalism: ideology of motherhood in colonial Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 20- 27, 1990; and Madhu Kishwar,

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The symbolic power latent in a *Desh-matrika* humiliated by poverty, colonization and social decadence, stalking the cremation ground, was exploited by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his aesthetic and political project. He gave Bengal the slogan that was to be chanted by millions for many decades to come,'Bande Mataram'. The concept of motherhood became deified and the 'New Women' were shown the way through which they could be metamorphosed. True enough, they were thrust into the vanguard of the anti-colonial struggle, but at a symbolic level.

Gandhi, on the other hand, harnessed the energy let loose by Bankim's rhetoric and gave it a powerful but pious twist. To Gandhi who eschewed violence, the mother-land personified in a blood-thirsty figure roaming the wilderness of the cremation ground at night was not palatable. He favoured the image of Sita whom he considered the ideal woman. For him the ideal woman was she whose power stemmed from moral courage and virtue. Such were the dominant images of woman in the period under review.

The Muslim community, however, did not subscribe quite fully to this imagery. In fact, with its newly awakened (and politicized) sense of separate identity, a section of the community viewed the worship of mother-earth and motherland with some misgivings, as a concept not in keeping with the monotheistic tenets of Islam though Sita was quite acceptable. Nor had Islam veered towards the Christian form of mother worship as exemplified in Mariolatory. But there were always the examples of Mother Amina and Bibi Fatima as model mothers. Much homage was also paid to Mariam, in fact. The saints Abdul Kader Jilani and Bayzid Bostani were specially revered for their devotion to their mothers.

In a sense, the notion and role of mother in Muslim society, devoid of suggestive political and religious symbolism, more closely approximated the

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"Gandhi on Women", *Economic and Political Weekly,* 20:40, Oct.5, 1985.

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Victorian ideal of mother. But 'seasonal' or 'partial' mothering practised by some Victorian mothers, as suggested by Pat Barr[27], would not be found in most middle-class Bengali families. The picture of the idyllic family was made complete by the birth of a son. (In the novel *Anowara*, the heroine's first born was a son and the author devotes some rapturous passages to how the infant graced the beautiful mother's lap).

In the traditional set-up, it was understood that a woman's greatest fulfilment lay in motherhood which 'came' to her most naturally and gracefully. But with the onset of the new age and its didactic manuals, elaborate instructions on the fine art of mothering were set down for the young girl. The manuals were full of details on child rearing — cleaning of infants, nutrition, psychological nurturing etc.

Motherhood, hitherto a silently accepted role which girls slipped into, soon became subject matter of a written discourse — articulated in manuals, journals and novels. Conservative and liberal, traditionalist or modernist, pounced on any opportunity to eulogize woman-as-mother to prove how well they thought of the female sex. Motherhood was the terrain where everyone felt comfortable.

Its rediscovery became part of the reformist project which called the new woman into being. It was a major channel through which woman was salvaged from the plight of being a temptress, and placed on the lofty reformist pedestal of purity. No less a person than Ameer Ali, writing in 1899 for the journal *Nineteenth Century*, reiterated the Koranic maxim "Paradise lies at the feet of one's mother", as a point of departure for his review of Muslim women's role throughout history:

Cynicism has gone so far as to declare that it is woman who stands

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[27]See Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs - In Praise of the Women of Victorian India*, (London: Century, 1989).

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> at the gate of life and poisons with her cup the existence of man. Far truer is the other saying, that 'at the feet of the mother is Paradise'.[28]

In the series of articles 'Narir Katha' mentioned above, (1926), Kasema Khatun built up a case for female education by emphasizing the social significance of the mother's role. She declared at the outset that she would show the linkage between education and ideal motherhood:

> What is woman to man? She is the mother. A short while after her installation as wife a woman craves to become a mother even if she does not wish to resign [sic] from her post as wife. In motherhood, she finds the meaning of being born a woman.[29]

But the writer went on to say that the role now demanded new skills, viz education. It was not sufficient that a woman clean a baby's diaper and lull it to sleep on her breast; that would not make her a mother necessarily. Her duty went far beyond this. For in her hands lay the sacred task of producing worthy sons. This, she argued, could not be achieved by the mother who only had a rudimentary education. Not that a B.A. and M.A. were prerequisites for the task, the writer hastily added. Kasema criticized the 'modern' education system in general both for men and women and pleaded for a system beneficial to both. The point being made was that, in order to be good mothers, *women would have to be given the same kind and degree of education as men.* Only enlightened mothers could produce sons like the Ali brothers and Napoleon.

The significant slant in these arguments seemed to be that while avowing that motherhood was the most glorious of woman's role; *education was correlated to a proper functioning of that role.* The discourse on mother-

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[28]Ameer Ali, "The influence of women in Islam", *The Nineteenth Century*, May 1899, London, p.756

[29]Kasema Khatun 'Narir Katha', *Saogat*, 4:2, 99, Sravan 1333 BS

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

hood provided a platform for advocacy of women's education.

Srimati Subodhbala Biswas, writing for the 'Mohila Mahfil' section of *Mohammadi* in 1927, showed to a more perfect degree, how far the ideology of motherhood had been internalized by women themselves. The writer raised the most burning question of the day, with regard to gender ideology:

> What is the ideal of womanhood, where does she belong? Civilization could never make up its mind — was woman's place in the home, or outside it? The home, family, society — women seemed integral to all institutions — and yet till one uncovered the ultimate place of women, there could not be any real progress.[30]

Subodh Bala provided an answer:

> Woman is the representative of the universal Mother... The hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world [sic]. Therefore, the fulfilment of a woman's life is in motherhood.[31]

By the 1930's motherhood was fully developed as a discourse. "Matrittwa Bidya" published in *Masik Mohammadi* spelt out the matter in detail. According to the essay the topic was discussed a lot but people often forgot that in this too great skill, ability and training, were required. The qualities of the ideal mother were enumerated --love, intelligence, selflessness, knowledge (about child care and nutrition, child psychology), and courage. Tips for the pregnant woman were also provided which included intake of fresh air, exposure to plenty of sunshine, regular exercise, nutritious diet, etc. Most of the women who established themselves as major or minor writers, devoted some time to the topic of motherhood and childcare. Rokeya Sakhawat, Akhtar Mahal, Razia Khatun and Shamsun Nahar, for instance, had pieces dealing solely with the topic. What the Muslim *mohila* wrote, on

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[30] Srimati Shubodh Bala Biswas, "Naritter Adarsha" (Bengali), (Ideal of Womanhood) *Masik Mohammadi*, 2:8, 93, Jaishtha 1336 BS

[31] ibid.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

motherhood and childcare, resembled in many respects, the content and style of Brahmo and Hindu Bhadamohila's writings on the subject.[32]

Rokeya read out "Shishu Palon" (meaning 'Child Rearing'), a very popular title used by Brahmo *Bhadomohila* also, at a Baby Show held in the Calcutta town hall in April 1920. She addressed the issue of child care from a pragmatic angle. In a few brief words she laid down the principles of basic childcare and the necessity of educating girls to equip them for the role of motherhood. As mentioned above, the theme of education as a prerequisite for good motherhood ran through the works of most publicists at the time. But there was a different note in Rokeya's article. She based her paper on infant mortality statistics; and rationalized beneficial indigenous practices pertaining to childbirth. Rokeya cited statistics for the province of Bengal and the city of Calcutta. In the year 1891, the total mortality figure for Bengal was over 1.6 millions. Of this about one-third were below the age of 20. In Calcutta during that year alone, 6000 infants died in the *atur ghar* due to lack of care. Rokeya next analyzed some traditional Hindu and Muslim practices and showed their congruence with 'modern' scientific conclusions. Rokeya concluded her address by giving several sound and down to earth tips on baby care.[33]

Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun's short piece bearing the same title was published in *Saogat* in 1927. There she reiterated Rokeya's tips on appropriate child care. She also quoted (as had Rokeya) a rustic proverb "One does not become a mother by giving birth alone". Akhtar Mahal used the proverb to give substance to the new concept of motherhood and child care that was to replace age old notions. She deplored that the Hindu and

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[32] See Borthwick, Chapter Four, pp.109-150

[33] R. S. Hossein, "Shishu Palon" (Bengali), (Child Care), *Saogat*, 2:6, 404-405, Baishakh 1327 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Musalman mothers of Bengal had forgotten how to rear a child. The other interesting turn in the argument (provided by most other writers on the topic too) was the suggestion that lack of education as well as poverty, was a prime cause behind the declining standards of motherhood.

The changed concepts of motherhood and child care as important elements in the new domestic ideology, were also articulated by Razia Khatun Chaudhurani in her essay 'Mayer Shiksha'. In the main she reiterated the arguments laid down by the others regarding the ill effects of a mother's ignorance. Razia made a rare suggestion towards the end:

> And so a little knowledge of homemaking and embroidery ought not to be the main or only characteristic of girls' education. Sex education geared to a healthy and harmonious conjugal life is necessary.[34]

Unfortunately, Razia did not elaborate on this in her writings.

Rokeya was in effect childless as the two infants she had given birth to had died a few months after being born. She had adopted her sister's daughter Nuri but she too died in 1931. Rokeya died the next year. Razia's life was short, as was Akhtar Mahal's. Both women died before attaining thirty, of ill health. Razia was a loving and dutiful mother who would at the same time often stop in the midst of a domestic chore and rush to her note book to jot down a short story or poem. However, short biographical notes to the one-volume collected works, of the two authors hint at ill health verging on depression. Family sources[35] were able to provide some greater details. Akhtar was married into a conservative family in the

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[34]Razia Khatun Chaudhurani, "Mayer Shiksha", (Bengali) (The education of mothers), *Saogat.* See also *Razia Khatun Chaudhuranir Rachana Sankalon,* ed. M. Abdul Quddus, (Comilla: Rabeya Khatun Choudhury, 1982) p.42 [hereafter cited as *RKRS*].

[35]Personal interviews with Razia's daughter Rabeya Khatun and sister Safura Hussain and Akhtar Mahals' niece Rokeya Kabir.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

mofussil town of Comilla where her literary proclivity was frowned upon. Razia on the the other hand was fortunate to be married into a family where her talents were appreciated. But being the wife of an idealist politician who spent much time in jail, was not quite conducive to middle class domestic bliss, having to set up home now here, now there. Sometimes Razia's mental health gave way. As her sister recollects with poignance:

> She had contracted typhoid after her marriage and had been treated by the famous Dr. Bidhan Ray and Dr. Nilratan Sarkar. But she would fall ill after every child birth. Her mind would be troubled and she would say 'what is the use of going on like this - like a mill stone round my father's neck in Calcutta, or round my brother in-law's in Comilla?.' She lost her mental equilibrium 15 days after the birth of her youngest daughter. An *ayurvedic* doctor Shyamdas Bachaspati was called in who administered many kinds of pastes. But Razia would throw the medicines away. And sometimes she would threaten (jokingly?) to throw the new born infant from the upper storey, holding the baby by its legs over the bannisters.[36]

Razia died in Calcutta, sometime after this last illness.

Whether such incidents pointed to post-partum depression, is open to conjecture. One is only tempted to say that an overall perusal of women's life histories and narratives gives one a feeling on occasion, that all was not as well in God's universe as popular pictures of domestic bliss would have us believe. Dark shadows did exist somewhere behind the sunny façade of the *bhadromohila*'s existence between the tightly circumscribed role of wife and mother.

Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908-1964) belonged to the same generation as Razia and Akhter, but she lived a much longer life and an apparently happier and more active one. Unlike Akhter Mahal and Razia, she had

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[36]Interview with Mrs Safura Hussain, March 1991, in Dhaka.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

access to formal educational institutions. She was married to a liberal lawyer who encouraged her in her career as a journalist, educationist and social worker.

Shamsunnahar's *Shishu Shiksha* (Child Education) was not an article on child care, but a full-fledged book published from Calcutta in 1939. Rabindranath Tagore, who was experimenting with the ideal environment for the development of children at Shantiniketan, felicitated Shamsunnahar on the publication of the book: "I appreciate your work from the depth of my heart. Your writings achieve their characteristic by dint of your style, intellect and maturity."[37]

The book contained eight chapters with headings like: At the beginning, Harmony and discipline, Play, Fear, Truthfulness, Tenderness, Sex education and Nursery school [sic]. The chapter headings reveal the conscious construction of motherhood and childhood by a *bhadromohila* who earned much renown as an educationist and writer. They also reveal how a segemnt of society wanted its young to develop.

Romantic Love: *Priya*

A new dimension was added to the wife's multifarious roles, other than that of mother. This was fostered by the idea of romantic love which first manifest itself in literature.

The theme of romantic love was first introduced to Bengali readers by two highly original translations from English into Bengali, viz: Bhudeb Mukhopadhay's *Anguriyo Binimoy* (Exchange of Rings) published in 1858 and Krishnakamal Bhattacharya's *Durakankshar Britha Bhramon* (Futile Journey of Desire) written in the 1840s. The theme of love found a central

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[37]Anwara Bahar Chowdhury, *Shamsunnahar Mahmud*, (Dhaka: Bangla Academy), 1987, p.54.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

place in both works; the love of Shivaji and Zebunnessa in the first, and the love between an untouchable and a person of high caste in the second. But Romantic Love received its first, full formulation at the hands of novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1898), who was responsible for the widespread popularity of that art form in Bengal.

Mir Mosharraf Hossain, considered the first Muslim writer of modern Bengali literature, married Kulsum, his childhood playmate and daughter of a tenant farmer in his father's estate in 1874. At the time he was already married to Azizunnessa whom he had never grown to love. Mir's dramatic meeting with Kulsum, now a full-grown maid, after many years at the scene of a catastrophic fire, the kindling of passion and love in his heart, and subsequent marriage, were described in semi autobiographical work, *Amar Jibanir Jibani Bibi Kulsum* (1910). Mir, a romantic and adventurous soul, had been born into a family (probably located in the stratum between Rafi-uddin Ahmed's rural *ashraf* and lesser gentry) which had seen better days. Brought up in the countryside of Lahinipara (in Kushtia) - unlike many of his contemporaries - Mir could not be quite counted as a member of the English educated Muslim elite in the big cities. As his family fortunes had declined he had to work as *sheresta* looking after other people's estates. Like Faizunnessa, Mir stood at the crossroads of a medieval and modern sensibility. He was a hybrid product of country and town, liberalism and orthodoxy, faith and rationalism. His portrayal of the character of Kulsum, object of his unfailing devotion, coincided with the rise of a new concept in gender relations, romantic love.

Woman as '*Priya*' (the beloved), now stood legitimately, if shyly, along-side *Kalyani.* In fact seldom if, ever was *Priya* allowed to threaten the guardian of the sacred hearth. If anything they were ideally one and the same. *Bibi Kulsum* is significant because it was an autobiographical account of a 'Renaissance' writer's congugal life. The ideal of romantic love within

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

marriage, manifest itself in Mir's relationship with his wife and the recording of that relationship. The eulogy in the opening page of the book will remain a classic expression of the new ideal:

> Kulsum, who is she to me? Why do I chant her name? What a sweet name it is — etched on my heart. Why this surge of love, this romantic attraction — this pouring of my soul? — you ask. Reader, you will learn in due time. Bibi Kulsum was the light of my soul, angel of my home, abode of my dreams. She was my partner in joy and sorrow, a chaste wife and holy mother; intelligent companion and learned guide, compassionate friend and adoring slave; home-maker, cook, nurse, healer, she was all these, she was my lover as I was hers - she was seated on the throne of my heart. And yet, the receptacle of all these virtues, was not what one would call beautiful.[38]

Kulsum, though a country-maid, was nontheless invested with many desirable traits. Though not educated formally, she was literate and a constant encouragement in Mir's literary career. Kulsum was not the evolved *bhadromohila* in the special sense we have used here, but was very nearly one, standing midway between Faizunnessa and Fatema Khanam. The sexual aspect of Mir's relationship with Kulsum (referred to in the book) surpassed, perhaps contravened, notions of Victorian/ Brahmo conjugal norms. Mir had frankly conceded the sexual.

But it was a sexuality legitimized by marriage and could thus he accommodated within the nascent middle class values. The concept of romantic love and sexuality in a legitimate setup was possibly more unique to Bengal than to Britain. The ideal portrayed in books may not have been achieved in reality most of the time. But there was a ground now for a glorious re-

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[38]Mir Mosharraf Hussain, *Amar Jivanir Jivani Bibi Kulsum*, (Bengali) (The Life behind my Life: Bibi Kulsum) (first publ. Calcutta: 1910) in *Mir Mosharraf Hussain Rachanavali*, Abdul Mannan ed. (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1976) Vol I, pp.372-373 [hereafter cited as *MHR*].

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

pudiation of the 'debauchery' and 'promiscuity' of the feudal class; for a sometimes self-righteous celebration of monogamous sexuality.

In the historical context, however, fiction was the first site for romantic love and was to remain so for a long time. Bengali writers - from Bankim, Rabindranath, Saratchandra, to Swarnakumari, Najibar Rahman, Kazi Imdadul Huq, Anurupa, Nirupoma, Shailabala Ghoshjaya, Nurunnessa and others - produced a crop of fictional works where plots centred around love, romance and betrayal. Around this time, Muslim women came forward with their own formulations of love relationships, the ideal hero, and the ideal heroine, in their fictional works. The male protagonist would be drawn along the lines of the 'new man' (product of the Bengal Renaissance): he would be liberal, western educated, idealistic, romantic, restrained, handsome in appearance and deed, reformist and modern when it came to gross social abuses, traditional in case of timetested values - a remarkable blend in fact. This was the general contour of the new male protagonist in literature; individual authors filled in the fine points according to individual taste and preference.

In *Bhadro* Muslim Society, members of the opposite sex seldom, if ever, got to interact socially, circumscribed as their lives were by the stringent code of *purdah.* More often than not, situations conducive to romantic attraction, were imaginary ones unlike Victorian society where courtship was a socially approved (and encouraged) avenue to matrimony and family life. In the Brahmo, Hindu and native Christian communities some measure of sexual desegregation had been achieved. Nurunnessa made use of this in her short novels *Bhagyachakra* and *Bidhilipi* published in the early 1930s. But as late as 1928, Rokeya was writing her diatribe against seclusion in *Aborodhbasini.*

Segregation was thus also a real problem in fiction (for it was supposed to 'mirror' reality). Writers of the period were very fond of writing

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

'garhastya' (domestic) or 'paribarik' (familial) novels. Nurunnessa circumvented the taxing problem created by segregation, in quite an unusual manner, in her first novel *Swapnadrishta.* It was the story of an intense romantic attraction on part of the male protagonist Anwar Ali, towards a vision of a woman he had seen only in a dream. Anwar goes through many of the motions of a man in love without having actually beheld the object of his adoration. This was the device through which Nurunnessa circumvented existing conventions of purdah and ventured into the world of romance and love. (In real life she was happily married to lawyer Kazi Ghulam Murshed of Serampore). But Nurunnessa changed her srtategy in her three novellas *Bhagyachakra, Bidhilipi and Niyoti* - where she tackled a sensitive issue - *purborag* or the stage of romantic attraction prior to full passion described in the ancient Indian theory of Erotics. The commentator, writing the introduction to Nurunnessa's collected works (1970), observed:

> The themes of illicit, socially disapproved passion and love were not the subject matter of her novels. In the main, she has depicted love in a domestic setting. As such her novels were truly a reflection of contemporary society.[39]

Pre-marital interactions between the sexes, however slight and 'pure' (i.e. non-physical) such as a glance or long walks, were new phenomena in the Bengali social scene. Their acceptance in literature, if not in real life, pointed to changed attitudes in gender relations. Nurunnessa celebrated love as a noble facet in human nature. The following passage from 'Niyoti' (Destiny) was one of the most eloquent tributes to love to emerge from the literature of that period. The writer herself addresses these words to the hero's mother when the hero (Reza) arrives on the scene to discover his

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[39]Mohammad Abdul Qaiyyum, Introd., *Nurunnessa Granthabali*, (Bengali) (Collected Works of Nurunnessa), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1970), p.xvi.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

beloved Rokeya in the throes of death. Reza realizes that the machinations of his proud, high born mother, have borne bitter fruit: he was never to be united with Rokeya:

> Alas, proud lady! Come see for yourself this pitiful sight! Comprehend that litigation and the like may stand in the path of transient union; but they can never be impediments in the path of that true and divine union of hearts which we call love. The eternal love that united these two, the exchanges that transpired were pure, heavenly, eternal, endless.[40]

Nurunnessas' depiction of love in her trilogy led a literary critic to comment: "The writer's favourable attitude to romance [sic] is amply manifest in these three works".[41]

Muhammad Ibrahim's *Zobeda* (published in 1922) bore the epithet 'domestic novel' on the title page. It was a love story with intensely romantic scenes, between two couples - Asad and Zobeda, Ramzan and Feroza. All the elements of prevailing notions of love were depicted here - purity, romanticism, yearning, suspicion of the heroine's chastity, her attempted suicide, upholding of the *Sati* ideal and re-union of the lovers who were, of course, man and wife.[42]

Najibar Rahman's *Anowara*, was much more popular as a novel, and much more conservative. The heroine Anowara falls in love with Nur Eslam on hearing him recite the holy Koran from afar. Nur falls in love (the reader was left to assume since the matter of falling in love is not openly mentioned), after a brief glimpse, caught accidentally from a window. 'Accidentally' because the writer would have you appreciate that no 'sharif' girl

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[40]Nurunnessa Khatun, 'Niyoti', in *Nurunnessa Granthaboli*, p. 685

[41]M. Abdul Qauyyum, ibid, p. fifteen.

[42]Muhammad Ibrahim, *Zobeda*, (Howrah: Bipin B. Das, 1922).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

would knowingly allow herself to be 'seen'. But even Najibar allowed his hero to proclaim after he wed Anowara the greatness of their love.[43]

The popular literary monthlies *Mohammadi* and *Saogat*, often contained short stories (e.g. *Madhurena*, *Romantic Biye*) which depicted romantic love. 'Modhurena' (1932) was a playlet depicting love as a basis for marriage. Social conditions were mirrored in references to the backwardness of Muslim girls compared to their Hindu and Brahmo counterparts whom Sajjad the 'modern' young hero considered more accomplished and hence more desirable. All the trappings of Victorian courtship are present - a tea party [sic] in the garden of Mr. Chaterjee the additional magistrate, a meeting between Sajjad and Rosy delibarately arranged by the elder sister in-law, a dramatic and impassioned declaration of love on Sajjad's part (termed a young *bhadrolok*, interestingly), and finally the couples' union in marriage.

'Romantic Biye', published in the previous issue of *Mohammadi*, was a good humoured satire about marriage and romantic notions among the idealistic youth of the urbanized middle calss. Amena, a young widow, and Samad, a young widower, pledge never to remarry. But Amena's well meaning guardians arrange a marriage for her. On the wedding night she is 'rescued' by Samad, a true sympathizer. The comrades flee to Assam, live in the same house (platonically) — but soon realize they are meant for each other and might as well get married. They proclaim love as the true basis of marriage. Running through the good-natured expose is a belief popular among a section of westernized liberals at the time that human actions are ultimately guided by the sex-drive. Of course, India had her own age-old notions of the glory and significance of sex, but we are now speaking of the 'western influenced' liberals.

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[43]Najibar Rahman, *Anowara*, (Calcutta 1914; reprint, Dhaka: Ananda Prakashan, 1988), p.87.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Romantic titles such as *Moner biye* (Marriage of Minds), *Prem O Pushpa* (Love and a Blossom), *Piyasi* (The Thirsty), *Shesh Anurodh* (The Last Request), etc., proliferated the popular journals. Though fictional works dealt with the theme of love and condoned it if it led to matrimony, the view was by no means a widely held one.

A certain section of the conservatives were not all that eager to concede '*prem mahatmyo*' (greatness of love). Indignation and anger at the portrayal of Muslim women's love for Hindu males in the novels of Bhudev and Bankim date back to the 1860's and 70s. The objection was not just toward the perceived indignity of women falling in love with those outside the pale of Islam, it was also the manner in which the love was portrayed (i.e. besotted Muslim women, stoic and invulnerable Hindu male, etc). The whole debate which ensued, produced a hostility toward romantic love in general. Several Muslim writers took up the pen in retaliation.

Ismail Hossain Shirazi's *Raynandini* (1916) was proclaimed by its author as a fitting rejoinder to Bankim's *Durgeshnandini* (1865). It depicted the love of Swarnamoyee, daughter of Kedar Ray, a sixteenth century chieftain, for the Muslim warrior Isa Khan. 'Love', usually relegated to an obscure and shadowy background in the chronicles of kings and states, now assumed the same importance as a deadly war. It got tangled up in politics and communal tension, the question of Muslim identity in the face of Hindu revivalism; sexual freedom, chastity and regulatory codes, etc. And woman was made to stand once again at the vortex of this whirlpool. A critic commenting on those times writes: "Muslim writers now resorted to construction of such historical situations of Hindu-Muslim conflicts where Muslims display nobility and valour, Hindu women fall irresistibly in love with them and embrace Islam".[44]

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[44]Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manosh*, p.348

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Social condemnation of all-encompassing 'romantic love' was expressed in an essay written as a rejoinder to Bankim's novels, particularly *Durgeshnandini* and his portrayal of Ayesha therein:

> No Muslim, for that matter, no true Hindu, will condone Ayesha's inundation in a flood of tears at the dead hour of night, by the side of a strange man of another creed, not bound to her by any legitimate ties. The love of Ayesha towards Jagat Singh, proclaimed and unproclaimed, is illicit, unnatural and irreligious. — We are not in favour of the apparently innocuous but inherently dangerous maxim: 'Love knows no bounds'. Only social anarchy can result from the violation of God's laws by giving in to the temptation of such forbidden fruit...[45]

Many issues converged here: the regulation of female sexuality and patriarchy's inherent fear of it (What was Ayesha doing at dead of night beside a man not legitemately bound to her?); communal prejudice (Jagat Singh was a Hindu); the religious question (unnatural and irreligious of Ayesha to go beyond the pale of her own religion). And the ultimate fear of *fitna* or social chaos. Love that knew no bounds would always have to be contained and regulated if anarchy was to be avoided. For love/romantic attraction was the other side of physical attraction, however platonic the aura given to it.

Thus, romantic love would only be tolerated if it was unaudacious and abided by communal norms pertaining to chastity and honour. A woman was not free to fall in love with whom she chose, even if it were in novels, particularly more so if it were in novels it would seem; because characters in books had a much wider currency and longer life than ordinary mortals. Society could not afford to lose this terrain because of sentimentality and

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[45] Abdul Malek Chowdhury, "Banga Sahitye Muslim Ramanir Sthan", (Bengali) (Position of Muslim Women in Bengali Literature), *Al Eslam*, 1:1, 50, Baishakh 1322 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

passion. The ideological debate notwithstanding, Bankim was a household word also in Muslim homes. So great was the power of his prose that readers were willing to temporarily suspend disbelief and prejudice to step into the exciting and imaginary world of romance he created.

A booklet titled *Bashore* was published in 1923. It was written by a not so well-known writer who dedicated it to the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. During those days, writers - great and small - looked up to the poet. The booklet was probably meant to serve as a 'guide' for newly weds, not in the sense of a manual but as what one could term a philosophic guideline for those about to set upon the most important of gender relations — that of man and wife. Unfortunately, there seem to be no allusions to the booklet, positive or negative, by contemporary writers. It was written in the form of two imaginary dialogues (see Bashore . for the first dialogue). In the closing lines of the second dialogue, the groom finally rejoiced in his union to a lofty and rational woman, thereby proclaiming the hegemony of the new domestic ideology; where the *priya* and *grihalakshmi* were one:

> Today I realize you are my wife, not a doll but a partner for life. You will correct me when I err and direct me on the right path; you are my fellow traveller, solace in my despair, my shelter, hope, desire. Come in this our first union let us pledge to fill life's journey with joy.[46]

Turning from literature to real life, the private letters of two couples who were corresponding with each other in the decade of 1940, corroborate the contention that romantic love had become an integral part of conjugal relations. Letters written by Muhammad Hasib a government officer in Calcutta to his wife Fatema in Manikganj; and of the famous singer Abbasuddin to

[46]Mohammaad Abdur Rouf, *Bashore*, (Bengali) (The Wedding Night), (Calcutta: Abdul Ohed, 1923) p.16.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

his wife Lutfunnessa, from Calcutta to Dhaka provide a rare insight into an aspect of husband wife relations. They also depict the family in transition - a situation where the wife was staying back at the in-laws' before setting up her own home. Both sets of correspondence project the husband as mentor and teacher, specially the letters of Abbasuddin which are replete with tips on how to turn the quilt, air the mattress, etc. What strikes one however, is the expression of solicitude, longing, and even passion (veiled) on part of the separated couple. The forms of address themselves, "Priyatameshu - a thousand kisses", "Priyo lakshmi amar", "Priyatama" - point to the new forms of endearment between husband and wife.[47]

We had started this section with a memoir, Mir Mosharraf's *Bibi Kulsum*, which depicted the cojugal relationship between Mir and his wife from 1874 to 1910. At the close of the period chosen for this study, another couple, Abul Fazl and Umratul Fazl, got married in 1938. Their marriage was a long and happy one. They left behind a record of their times and their lives in separate memoirs. Abul Fazl had already been married before, and like Mir, his previous marriage was not a happy one. Umrat, who was twenty years younger than Fazl, described in her memoir how Fazl had aroused feelings of love in her:

> Our married life started on the first day of that auspicious year and for fourty-four years it shone like the sun. His love was so deep that I felt I could create something as beautiful as ocean-spray... He was an incomparable lover whose love knew no bounds. A compassionate human being and an ideal mentor.[48]

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[47]Private correspondence of: Abu Mazhar Muhammad Abdul Hasib (letters to his wife Fatema written from Faridpur, Calcutta, Shibpur, Asansol), 1933-35; Fatema Khanam (letters written from Lesraganj in Manikganj to her husband Hasib), 1933-36; and Abbasuddin (letters written by to his wife Lutfunnessa), 1939-1947.

[48]Umrat-ul Fazl, *Smriti Katha Priyodiner Smriti*,(Bengali),(Memories of cherished Days), (Dhaka: Muktodhara, 1987) pp 9-10

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

One is reminded of Mir and Kulsum in their quiet abode in the moffusil town of Delduar. But times had changed. Abul Fazl was an urbanized scholar, critic and teacher, and Umrat was his fitting counterpart.

Limits to Domestic Ideology

Bengali Society agreed on the whole that woman's place was in the home, and man's place in the world outside from which he could retire into the sanctuary of family life whenever he desired. However, in the West by the 1930s women had by and large acquired the right to join in the work force (or were incorporated into it as the economic need for greater labour arose).[49] In some regards though - e.g. the right to vote, acess to higher educational degress and the constraints of domesticity - women, East or West, ran along parallel courses.

In the matter of seclusion and participation in the economic sphere, women in the West did enjoy greater freedom. To the *bhadrolok*, freedom was a matter of great censure. An endemic fear of the social revolution in western countries that had effected the breakdown of barriers between the private and public spheres and released women on to the 'open' spaces, led many Bengali publicists to decry the social relations and gender ideology of the West while selectively adopting some.

In 1930 *Masik Mohammadi* published an article analysing in negative terms, such unbridled freedom. The author managed to unearth certain texts by western publicists whcih urged women to retun to the sanctuary of home:

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[49]For a discussion of women's participation in waged work in the West, see: Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, 'Women's work and the family in nineteenth century Europe', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, January, 1975; Sandra Burman, *Fit Work for women*, (London: Croom Helm, 1979); and Wanda Neff, *Victorian Working Women: A Historical and Literary Study of Industries and Professions*, (New York: columbia Univeristy Press, 1929).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> Savants in the west have taken up the pen to urge women to return to their true role of *Kalyani* [sic] - All of Europe is crying out to women to return to the home as *Kalyani.* Their throne is in the home, their kingdom there, there the work-place ordained for them by Nature.[50]

Some educated women too joined in this denouncement. The extent to which domestic ideology and the traditional role ascribed to women had been internalized by women themselves was evident in a rejoinder by a reader to Rokeya's radical piece '*Alonkar na badge of Slavery*'. Rokeya's formulation of the woman question and her challenge to the existing gender ideology created a sharp reaction among readers who felt obliged to protest. The particular lady above proudly declared her allegiance to domesticity:

> The manner in which she (Rokeya) has criticized the male species seems wanton and unbecoming to a woman of high birth. I reiterate that a woman's place is in the home. Husband and family her primary concern rather than learning how to plead [sic] in the courtroom - our goal is raising our children, providing comfort to our husbands and being the *grihalakshmi* [sic].[51]

What did Rokeya S. Hossain herself - pioneer of the women's movement in Bengal, writer, educationist and social worker - have to say about it all? She got married in or around 1896 to Sakhawat Hossain, a widower who was 24 years her senior. Rokeya's first biographer Shamsunnahar described her as a good housewife and painted a rosy picture of their marriage, which was "joyful on account of Rokeya's many qualities".[52] As expected, these 'many qualities' included cooking, entertaining, knitting, orderliness etc.

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[50]"Pashchatya nari swadhinatar swarup",(Bengali),("Reality of Women's Emancipation in the West") *Masik Mohammadi*, 3:8,640, Jaishta 1337BS.

[51]*Mohila*, Bhadro 1310 BS, cited in Mustafa Nurul Islam, p.178.

[52]Shamsunnahar Mahmud, *Rokeya Jibani*, p.47.

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However, recently one scholar, who refused to accept the picutre at face value, commented:

> The sage of Bengali women's Emancipation was married off to a widower old enough to be her father. - Rokeya was usually silent on personal matters,.. but in a letter written on 30th April 1931, she wrote, 'I was deprived of a father's love in childhood; in conjugal life nursing was my main activity - monitoring urine, cooking barley, informing doctors. A mother twice - even that did not last for long'.[53]

Rokeya took up the theory of 'complementary limbs of the same organ' as a basis for the exposition of gender relations she developed in her famous essay 'Ardhangi' (1904). Man and Woman were projected as two wheels of the same cart, the same social body. But Rokeya gave this formulation of separate spheres a remarkable subversive twist. In *Ardhangi* she took the argument by its horn and proved that men and women were indeed equally important parts of the same organ, wheels of the same vehicle. But she too accepted *complementarity* and discarded the *separate* part, positing that women could participate in full measure in the public domain. The 'world' outside was just as much a part of a woman's life as the 'home'. Where Kasema had advocated education to facilitate the role of mother, companion and wife, Rokeya advocated it so that woman may claim her full legal, social and economic rights. The ideal woman of the one was in keeping with domestic ideology reminiscent of Ruskin, Hali or Rabindranath; the ideal of the other was a woman, who was much closer to the one envisaged by John Stuart Mill.

It is true that at certain points in her career specially while campaigning for her school, Rokeya upheld domestic ideology and emphasised the

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[53]See Azad, *Nari*, p.245. This, one of Rokeya's rare testimonies of her domestic life, Azad maintains, belies the myth of the happy housewife.

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household skills and training imparted at Sakahawat Memorial. In her effort to popularize female education in a society that opposed it, and laid great stress on chastity and domesticity, one wonders if there was any other alt-ernative. Her 'advocacy' of domestic ideology, if one might call it such, was evident in her 'domestic' pieces: *Shishu Palan, Sugrihini, Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl*, etc. The list of skills laid down in "Sugrihini" read somewhat like the lists of most Victorian, Brahmo and Muslim refor-mers. But the analogy ended there. From the same pen also ensued essays such as "Griha" (1904), "Koopmonduker Himalay Darshan" (1905); a novel such as *Padmarag* (published in 1924, but written much earlier), and a fan-tasy such as *Sultana's Dream* (1905). In fact it was from Rokeya's pen that the boldest challenge to domestic ideology came.

In her fantasy *Sultana's Dream* (1908) written in English she gave free rein to her imagination. In the fictitious 'Ladyland' the perfect Lady is transformed into a perfect human being, in a society where women do all the work outside and men stay within the *andarmahal*. Reminiscent of the mythical land of the Amazons, women in Ladyland administered the state, cultivated martial arts, the sciences, and guarded their noble country from interlopers. This book was perhaps the site where Rokeya worked out her vision to its logical conclusion, where her pen accepted no compromise.

In *Padmarag* Rokeya questioned the ultimate validity of romantic love and domestic bliss. In *Kup Mondook* she challenged the notion that women are not fit to do the same kind of work as men i.e. the notion of their biological inferiority hence, incapacity to earn their own livelihood. And finally in "Griha", Rokeya asked society to cast a glance at what generally passes off as women's homes. Do women have homes in the truest sense of the word? — she asked. Rokeya concluded that neither the lady in her mansion, nor the poor woman in her hut, nor the housewife in the house,

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

really had a home - it was the lord's or the master's or the husband's.[54] Though the hegemony of domestic ideology was quite apparent, occasionally others joined Rokeya in challenging it. Mrs M. Rahman was a regular contributor to the women's column in Nazrul's progressive and popular periodical - *Dhumketu*. Like Rokeya Mrs Rahman had a witty, sharp style which she used often to denounce patriarchal institutions:

> And this matter of marriage... I had thought the tendency towards this was pronounced among Hindu and Muslim ladies only. But oh my! It now appears educated Christian and Brahmo women are addicted to it as well... But there are a myriad other ways to realize one's womanhood other than marriage.[55]

The debate continued well into the 1920s. Sohifa Khatun's poem 'Ramani' (Woman) contained a value-system that required a woman to serve and adore an unworthy husband even if he practised polygamy. This caused another woman to write 'Ramani II' in protest, and this was followed by another male protest — all published in *Sadhana* in 1919.[56]

Changing Notions of Sexuality

The home was the legal site of sexual transactions i.e. — the area where society allowed, in fact encouraged men and women to enter into sexual relations. In the early part of the present century, existing notions of sexuality and sexual relations, underwent some subtle changes. As already

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[54]R.S. Hossein, "Griha", (Home), *Nabanur*, 2:5, 241-2, Aswin 1311BS.

[55]Mrs M. Rhaman, "Amader Swarup", (Our true nature), *Dhumketu* - "Sandhya Pradeep", 13, 9-10, Aswin 1329 BS.

[56]For the controversial pieces, see Mussamat Sohifa Khatun, "Ramani", (Bengali), (Woman), *Sadhana*, Jaishta 1326 BS, 1:2; Mussamat Chaman Khatun, "Ramani", *Sadhana*, ; Asharh 1326 BS, 1:3; and Jane Alam Choudhury, "Ramani: Pratibader pratibad", (Woman: A protest to a protest), *Sadhana*, Sraban 1326, 1:4.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

pointed out in Chapter II, male sexual apetite was recognized and amply accommodated by polygamy and concubinage in Islamic sexual discourse. There female sexuality was also acknowledged by the right of women to satisfaction and the right to seek divorce on grounds of husband's impotency or insanity. Later, after Ghazzali had magnified female sexuality, the maxim that it must be regulated and contained gained ground.

The notions of woman's voracious sexual apetite and the power of her sexuality were also embedded in the Indian subconscious as exemplified by countless mythological stories in which irresistible *apsaras* descended from the abode of the gods to destroy the meditation of sages. Parvati herself had tempted Lord Shiva out of his meditation as Menaka had destroyed Viswamitra's. But where Shiva, repository of strength, was not any worse off for the cosmic union, Viswamitra, a human, was undone. The popular Sanskrit proverb - *nari narakasya dwaram* (woman is the gateway to hell) - was oft cited.

But as the nineteenth century wore on, woman was recast by reformist ideology which reconstructed her to a great extent along puritan-romantic lines, and she emerged as a lofty, pure, bountiful being, receptable of many virtues. She was divested of her threatening sexuality and even her sensuality which found favour earlier, to suit the needs of reconstructed middle class culture. Sometimes fragile and placed on a pedestal (depending on her family status and wealth), sometimes hard working and thrifty, but feminine (a class function again), she was always virtuous and chaste. Elements of puritanism now entered into the articulation of *bhadrolok* gender ideology and sexual codes (like Victorian London, however, prostitution thrived in Calcutta during the period). As far as the women in the *bhadro* household was concerned, she had to owe allegiance to a chaste, if romanticized ideal of womanhood, sometimes reminiscent of Ruskin's Lily, sometimes of Thanawi's *Zewar*, sometimes Tagore's *Manos-sundari* cum *Griha-*

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

lakshmi/Kalyani.

Thus was Ghazzali subverted. Popular tracts and novels were the best instruments of this subversion. In north India, seat of Muslim culture, while Thanawi, Altaf Hussain Hali and Sayyid Mumtaz Ali were conjuring up the figure of the ideal Muslim woman equipped for the exigencies of the 'modern age', each in his own way, Urdu novelists such as (Deputy) Nazir Ahmed and his nephew Rashid-ul Khairi were producing more delectable matter. The heroines of their highly popular novels (which were also widely read in '*Sharif*' Bengal) were stoic in suffering, and chaste in the face of all adversity, never losing their feminine charm. Heroines who were widowed or abandoned could not afford to be idle and frivolous (traits never thought well-off). They were depicted as hard working, thrifty, etc. The puritan work ethic was operative here.

The *bhadromhila* fed on puritan values would not have liked to talk about prostitution as it would involve the topic of sexuality. One female writer however, broached the subject once. Razia Khatun, in a passage on loveless marriages, said:

> People have transformed this cooperation [sic] which is marriage into a sale of the self. Where enticement and entertainment are forced activities, that is the site of prostitution. We despise prostitutes but are not aware that it is rampant within the walls of our homes. The husband does not cherish his wife, yet she has to entice him. You may call this 'loyalty to one's husband' but I do not. How many children are born of 'love' and how many out of the 'lust' we have learned to condemn?[57]

The writings of the well-known social reformer Lutfur Rahman (1889-1936) contravened the average *bhadrolok* attitude to prostitution in that they

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[57]Razia Khatun, "Samaje o Grihe Narir Sthan", (Bengali),(Woman's Place in the Society and Home), in *R.K.R.S.*, p.13.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

displayed a genuine compassion for prostitutes and their fate. Unlike others, Rahman laid the blame squarely on men rather than the women themselves, as was the wont in *bhadro* society. 'Nari Tirtha' was Rahman's home for destitute women in Calcutta. Rahman wrote about his project in an article titled "Pather Meye" (literally: Girl of the Street) in *Sadhana* (Baishakh, 1329 BS). He drew a picture of the girl who was forced into exile (and hence prostitution) from respectable, but cruel, middle class society, for a single slip. The boy who committed the act of lust was accepted back into the fold - the girl forever turned out by irate parents (compare this with the portrayal of Victorian attitudes to girls who had given in to temptation[58]). The compassion of Rahman's stand became evident when he argued that the flesh is weak, to err is human - but to condemn the 'sinner' rather than comprehend human failings was cruel. The repetitive use of 'sin'/'sinner' in this and almost all other writings on the matter pointed to the obsession of the middle class with the concept.

But sin, sex and temptation were not supposed to be the genteel lady's concern. According to the new school of thought, the Prophet had never viewed woman as an organ of the devil, but as *muhsunah* (the chaste) and a "fortress against Satan".[59] Scholars of *Hadith* (Tradition) such as Tarmidi and Muslim were now quoted to establish the capacity of women for purity, along with Koranic verses. The old attitudes did not disappear from the mental world of Muslims - but on it were juxtaposed, new ones, by a reformist culture that now required that women be considered fully capable of maintaining her purity in the wicked, wide world (though a modified and narrowed one for her).

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[58]See Martha Vicinus (ed), *Suffer and Be Still. Women in the Victorian Age*, (Bloomington: 1972; London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1980.)

[59]See M. Imran, *Status of Women in Islam*, (New Delhi: Maikazi Maktaba Islami, 1981), pp.1-4.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

In Bengal, attitudes to sexuality were varied and reflected the changes taking place among the Muslims all over India. There was the conservative attitude which stood for the status quo in gender relations i.e. women should contain themselves within the andarmahal and a liberal one which advocated a greater role outside the home. In 1923 *Islam Darshan* published an article which attacked the activities of the 'liberal' section:

> There is a section which represents the so called 'new creed'. They see that in the cities girls and boys from certain communities enjoy the joy of unrestrained mixing together. - It must be for this that these new Muslims have set up associations bearing names such as 'Nari Swadhinata Mission', 'Nari Tirtha' etc., so that members of the opposite sex may enjoy each other's company at gatherings where they interact freely, brush hands, and pour forth ardent passages from the latest books to hearts seeped in thoughts of romance and love; in short, enjoy the pleasures of these veritable carnivals. - All these are not available in traditional Muslim society. The modest, bashful, downward glances of fair maids in the secluded Muslim *antahpur* do not appeal to the new liberals![60]

Such conservatism was offest by a parallel growth of reformist liberalism among a section of the Muslim intelligentsia. Whatever the stand, none could deny the importance of sexual relations and the necessity to control the discourses on it. The "Taujihul Adab", a Bengali manual written by M. Ghiyasuddin was published from Calcutta in 1924 with the purpose of setting down rules of sexual behavior for the new generation. In a section titled '*Sahabas Pranali*' (Rules of Cohabitation), detailed instructions were set down regarding sexual relations including the act of copulation (The Behesti Zevar also contained a similar section). The instructions of the

[60]Mohammad Ghulam Husain, B.A. "Islamer Purda Tattwa", (Bengali), (The theory of Purdah in Islam), *Islam Darshan*, Kartik 1329 BS, cited in Islam, *Samoyikpatre*, p.90.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Adab were comprehensive: "... call your wife by her name as this is a sign of love", etc.[61] It was recommended that sexual intercourse should ideally take place two to three times a week, more if desired. Rules regarding the days and manner for intercourse were given. Withdrawal of male organ before wife's satisfaction was discouraged.

Mernissi provides a theoretical explanation for the emphasis on sexual satisfaction of both partners in Islamic didactic literature: "Sexual satisfaction for both partners is seen as necessary to prevent adultery... As a protective device against *zina*, marriage is highly recommended to believers of both sexes."[62] *Zina* paved the way for the ultimate horror termed *fitna*. Islam also discouraged celibacy as it considered a sexually frustrated person to be dangerous to society.

Inspite of the injunctions of religious and didactic manuals it was doubtful how many women of the period covered here would testify to the concern and consideration that their husbands were enjoined to show towards them. Conjugal life was a region which the most thorough of the empire's census statisticians could not enter. Various evidence subtly suggest that sexual joy between married partners may have been more a normative ideal than a reality in most households. This could have been due to two major factors in conjugal relations - callousness on part of the husband and puritanism on part of both.[63]

Like his Hindu and Brahmo counterpart, the Muslim *bhadroloklok* set

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[61]Mohammad Ghiyasuddin, *Taujihal Adab*,(Bengali), (Rules of Behaviour), (Hughli: Author, 1924), p.77.

[62]Mernissi, *Beyond*, pp.58-59. *Zina* means illicit intercourse, "any sexual intercouse between two persons who are not in a state of legal matrimony or concubinage"- Encyclopaedia of Islam, (Leyden, 1934), cited by Mernissi, [illegible]., p.58.

[63]See Borthwwick for references to bhadrolok puritanism in pp.19, 142.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

down clear boundaries to his sexual vision. Two of the clearest indicators of this 'limitation' or 'puritanism' were his predilection to platonic love and eulogy of motherhood. Abul Fazl - a founding member of the Muslim Sahitya Samaj of Dhaka, notable writer, critic, advocate of women's emancipation - wrote for the book review section in *Saogat* a critique of Akhtar Mahal's *Niyontrita*. It was a novel of unrequited love, in which Ayesha nursed her love for her married cousin Anwar; Abdul Kader nursed his burning love for the married Ayesha. This was the way Abul Fazl viewed the situation: "Abdul Kader fell in love with Ayesha. That love was noble, devoid of lust. Its glory filled the emptiness of his lifelong bachelorhood. He had loved Ayesha, he had not lusted for her."[64]

Abul Fazl could condone and sympathize with love outside of marriage. But such love had to be free of lust. His frank essay *Joun Gnyan* (Science of Sex), published in 1924, perhaps epitomized the liberal attitude to sex. In place of terms such as *fitna, zina,* women's *qaid* power and the need to regulate it through simultaneous gratification and containment, the machinations of Satan, etc.— one comes across phrases such as the mutual attraction of the sexes as Nature's way of perpetuating the species, natural expression of sexuality its sublimation and repression, perversion, etc.[65] Names such as Havelock Ellis and Freud were invoked. The writer emphasized sexual compatibility as a basis of happy conjugal life. To substantiate his point he referred to a survey of prostitutes where one fourth of the sample had indicated sexual dissatisfaction as a cause for their taking to that trade. These statements were made in a matter of fact tone without

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[64]Abul Fazl, "Niyontrita", (Bengali), (The Regulated), in Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun, *Niyontrita*, (Bengali), (The Regulated), (Dhaka: Raihana Begum, 1979), p.xix.

[65]Abul Fazl 'Joun Gyan', in *Abul Fazal Rachanabali*, (Bengali), (Collected Works of Abul Fazl), (Chittagong: Boighar, 1975), pp.608-610.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

any onus on women. He felt that it was time to break the taboo on sex and speak of it without secrecy.

This was the same Abul Fazl who had lamented the fate of Muslim women sentenced to the *andarmahal*; who had befriended the much older Mamlukul Fatema. Separated from her husband by her own choice, Fatema was then struggling to make both ends meet and to raise her children. She had worked in Rokeya's school at Calcutta; built up Posta Girls' School in Dhaka and in the midst of all this, affectionately entertained the rising young writers of a Dhaka throbbing with new life. Fatema who was always alone, always in widow's white, finally succumbed to that 'illness without a name' (to use Betty Freidan's phrase) which we can now identity as a severe mental depression to which was added the travail of a gallstone. The illness had kept her from what she most loved - her writing and her work. Abul Fazl, in a tribute to Fatema Khanam in the year of her death (1957), wrote: "Surprisingly she lived for 23 long years after her health broke down. But she never recovered nor wrote after that."[66]

As already mentioned in this Chapter, Abul Fazl's second wife Umrat-ul Fazl has left behind a record of their conjugal life in her memoir. If one removes the veneer of euphemism that *bhadromohila* invariably used in personal narratives, one can decipher a few frank references to a joyous physical relationship. Love - emotional and physical - had drawn Fazl and Umrat together to an extent where none could bear the thought of parting from each other. Fazl was forever fresh and new in Umrat's eyes as she was in his. Moments of touch and adoration are described with pride.

In an earlier period, Faizunnessa had made a few brief references in the preface to *Rupjalal* to her short-lived conjugal bliss. But conjugal

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[66]Abul Fazl, "Fatema Khanam: Alochona", in *Samokal*, Agrahayan 1364 BS, cited by Mahmuda Siddika, *M. Fatema Khanam*, (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1989) p.32.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

happiness was not her lot in life, she regretted and soon due to the machinations of her co-wife, her husband's attraction towards her vanished, a state to which the proud and passionate lady could never reconcile. *Rupjalal* itself, predating the 'modern' writings of the subsequent generation of women, abounded with sexual imagery, and scenes of mutual attraction between the hero and heroine.[67]

But, by and large, later narratives seldom dwelt on sexuality. The later writers were silent on this aspect of their lives. Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein, the most renowned Muslim woman of modern Bengal, had no place for sexuality in her fiction or non-fiction. A content analysis of other fiction writers (e.g. Nurunnessa, Mamlukul Fatema, Razia Chaudhurani, Akhtar Mahal) reveal that others displayed less uneasiness with the 'physical' than Rokeya. But by and large, even with the growth of liberalism perhaps on account of it, the puritan attitude had imbued the minds of the *bhadro* community in its transition to modernity.

Changes in the Domain of Marriage

As before, marriage remained the high point in a girl's life. On becoming a wife a woman acquired her own social identity and became mistress of her own little kingdom. Often, marriage could be liberating in several ways, specially for the new breed of women married to the new breed of men. It could mean greater freedom through relaxation of purdah, and greater access to education and social mobility.

The institution of marriage itself underwent many changes during this period (1900-1939) compared to the period (1876-1900) reviewed in the previous chapter. Increasingly, the practices of polygamy, child-marriage and concubinage fell into disrepute. Polygamy continued to exist legally for

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[67] See Faizunnessa, *Rupjalal*, pp. 286-289 and Chap.VI of this thesis

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

the Muslim community. According to a reformist article published in *Islam Pracharak* (1903), out of a total population of three crores (i.e. 30 millions) of Muslims in Bengal, only about 3% to 5% were practising polygamy. Despite this, judging by the disputes in the popular press, polygamy came under greater social censure till by 1940 few middle class *bhadrolok* would be seen to practice it.[68]

Age at Marriage

The reformer and publicist I. H. Shirazi raised his voice against social abuses in the form of child marriage in two separate articles published by the conservative periodical *Al Eslam* in 1917 and 1919. He reiterated the arguments against child marriage made by those before him, seeing in it a hindrance to female education and progress, and the general blossoming of a child's life. Considering child marriage specially harmful for girls, Shirazi saw in the custom a lamentable fate for them in the untimely loss of their youth. Marital incompatibility was another of its bad effects and he predicted that the practice would lead to the downfall of the Muslims.[69] In his second piece Shirazi referred to the matter again and recommended that the age of marriage should be 23-24 for boys and 14-15 for girls.[70]

Al Eslam published an article by Islambadi in 1919, containing a summary of resolutions adopted at the country conference of the *Anjumane Ulema* (Meeting of religious leaders) held in 1918 in Patiya and Satkaniya in Chittagong Division. According to the *Anjuman*, the social ills that

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[68]See Chap.II of this thesis.

[69]Shirazi, "Nari Jatir Durgoti", (Bengali), (The woes of women), *Al Eslam*, 3:5, 280, Bhadro, 1324 BS.

[70]. Shirazi, 'Bibaho Niti', (Bengali), (Principles of Marriage), *Al Eslam*, 5:7,381, Kartik, 1326 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

plagued Muslim society were: child marriage, excessive dower (*mohr)* and trousseau *(zevar*) and pageantry at wedding ceremonies. Islamabadi also condemned child marriage on medical and economic grounds.[71]

Among women writers, a liberal stand was taken by Ayesha Ahmed in an important essay published in the 'Mohila Sankya' (Women's issue) of the progressive periodical *Saogat* (1929). In discussing the backwardness of the Muslim Community she focussed on ignorance and seclusion of women as prime factors. Ayesha maintained that customs and mores, such as child marriage and untimely motherhood, which acted as barriers to the development of women as full fledged social and human entities would have to be weeded out as early as possible.[72]

The essay was written sometime after Katherine Mayo had published her controversial book *Mother India* from USA in 1927. In the book, Mayo depicted Indians as a race debased on account of harmful customs such as child marriage. The biological and moral retardation she saw in India offered a legitimation of colonial rule. Ms Mayo's book created great indignation among many Indians and was seen to have had a bearing on the British government's subsequent passing of the Child Marriage Restraint and the Age of Consent Acts.

Whereas in the Age of Consent debates of the 1890s, the Raj and the Hindus were the main parties involved, in the debates which raged in the 1920s, the Muslim Community participated in great measure also. The issue of child marriage became the main focus of reformist, governmental and conservative concern with the announcement of the child marriage restraint bill in 1928. The proposed bill created a great furor in all quarters. Prior

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[71]Moniruzzaman Islamabadi, 'Samaj Samskara', (Bengali), (Social reform), *Al Eslam*, 5: 3,156, Asharh 1326 BS.

[72]Ayesha Ahmed, "Muslim Samaje Unnatir Antorai", (Bengali) (Impediments to Progress in Muslim Society), *Saogat*, 7:1, 42, Bhadro 1336 BS

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

to this the government had intervened in Muslim family law once before in 1872 through the Registration of Muslim Marriages Act.

The community immediately grouped into various positions. Their views were aired in the popular press, limericks were composed, petitions addressed to the Raj, and even a delegation or two were sent up. It became apparent that there was a quarter in Muslim society which resented government interference in indigenous custom. The periodical *Sudhakar*, published in the late 19th century by the orthodox Sudhakar group led by men such as Meherullah, Reazuddin Ahmed and Abdul Karim, was now succeeded by a host of periodicals like the *Muezzin, Islam Pracharak* and *Al Eslam*. In its editorial, *Muezzin* categorically criticized The Age of Consent Bill. In doing so it was actually opposing legislation that was not based on the Sharia or Muslim religious law. The editorial stand was that the malpractice vis-a-vis marriage in the Muslim society was due to violation of and improper application of Islamic *Sharia*.[73] As such the government would do better to implement the *Sharia* rather than pass the bill. The same editorial also added: "The Zamindar of Baliadi near Dhaka, Khan Bahadur Kazemuddin Siddiky, has launched a strong protest against the proposed bill and we are at one with him."[74] The following year, *Muezzin* reiterated its statement:

> The grounds for opposition were fear of sexual promiscuity and social disharmony. It was predicted that Hindus and Muslims would never accept the bill because once enacted it would usher in undesirable, obscene and licentious acts.[75]

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[73]See Editorial, 'Bibaho Ain Shamskar', (Bengali), (Reform of Marriage law), *Muezzin*, 1: 2, Sravan 1335, cited in Mustafa Nurul Islam, p.80

[74]ibid.

[75]ibid.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Muezzin was joined by another orthodox periodical *Sharat-e Islam* in its denunciation of the Bill as indignation at colonial interference in the personal law and lives of subjects for whom the British government otherwise showed little concern.[76] The bill of 1928 was popularly called the 'Sarda Bill'.

But there were many advocates of women's emancipation at the time who welcomed the Bill, interference or not. They supported both the Act of 1929 (dealing with age of marriage) and 1930 (dealing with age of sexual intercourse) as positive steps towards eradicating harmful practices of which women were the greatest victims.

The more liberal periodical *Masik Mohammadi* offered its whole-hearted support to the Child Marriage Bill. The editorial of the Baishakh issue of *Mohammadi* (1335 BS) announced that there was no cause to oppose the Bill from the viewpoint of Islam. As consent between two adults was an integral part of a Muslim marriage, the journal felt that the Bill was in keeping with the dictates of Islam. Other liberal papers echoed the sentiment. The most important thing, however, was that the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) which had several Muslim representatives in it had been fighting in favour of the Bill. When the Child Marrigae Restraint Act was passed in 1929 the AIWC regarded it as a political triumph. Under the act the solemnization of marriage between a bride under fourteen and groom under eighteen was made a punishable offence.

While these debates were going on in town and country, among Hindus and Muslims, there were signs of change in marital norms. Statistics and figures are hard to procure. Nonetheless, the Census of India 1921, does provide us with a brief view of the 'real' situation as recorded by the

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[76] See Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, "Gender and Imperialism in British India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XX: 43, Oct. 26, 1985.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

archivists and administrators of the Raj. Imperial statisticians made some rough computations to arrive at an approximate average age at which marriages took place in both communities: "These calculations have given the average age at marriage for females in Bengal as 12.03 years and for males 20.13 years."[77] The census report continued that marriages in which the bride was less than 10 and the bridegroom between 15 and 25 were becoming rare. It noted a certain rise in the age of marriage and made the following observation which is worth quoting at length:

> A comparative analysis based on census data in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1881 shows a comparative rise in age at marriage... There has been a steady rise in age at which marriage takes place... This may have been due in part to the fact that the last few years were hard times but the tendency of public opinion to favour later marriage has been a significant one.[78]

The census further noted that though girls would be married off early:

> ...the proportion of girls unmarried between 15 and 20 is still only 55 per mille... the practice of marrying girls very much before puberty is becoming less common... among the Hindus the bhadralok represented by the Brahmans and the Baidyas take the lead in postponing marriage both for males and females.[79]

The census also observed that the Muslim *bhadralok* were lagging behind in this from their more 'educated' and professionalized Hindu-Brahmo counterparts.

The Age of Consent issue was one around which lot of other issues accumulated - sexuality, validity of older social system, scriptural

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[77] *Census of India, 1921*, Vol V, Bengal, Part I, (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1923), p.266

[78] ibid., p.272

[79] ibid., p.272

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injunctions, the authority of orthodox interpreters of religion etc. The various stands taken reflected the ideological contradictions and contestations that existed side by side, adjusting, accommodating, accepting or clashing as the case may be.[80]

Marriage and the *Bhadromohila*

Muslim women of the period, whose narratives form part of the present research, have not dwelt at great length on their marriages. Still, it is possible to construct a picture from all the sources we do have. Marriage to the new professional gentry offered a different life style for the women of the 1920's and 1930's. It involved homemaking, budgeting and entertaining in a limited measure. Being a good companion was becoming a popular concept among the Muslim middle class elite.

As mentioned above marriage could often mean a relaxation of purdah, greater social mobility (travelling) or greater access to education. The dramatic step of 'coming out of purdah' was described by Shaista Ikramullah. This happened, some time after her marriage to an officer in the Indian Civil Service, at a garden party hosted by an Executive Councillor. Till then she had been officially in purdah though after her marriage its rigidity had been much relaxed. She did not enjoy her first experience of 'being out' at all.

Nurunnessa Bidyabinodini, born in a well established family in Murshidabad, recalled that on account of being born into a family with a proud history, which laid great emphasis on the strictest purdah, her social and worldly experience was of a very limited nature. As soon as she completed her eighth year, her movements became confined within the *andarmahal*. She got married at the age of 18 to a law-practitioner from Serampore in

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[80] A list of women who have been discussed here with their age at which they married is given in Appendix .

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Hughly, who was given to travelling and took his wife along with him whenever he could. In her own words:

> As my husband's habit of travelling became second nature, a year after my marriage, in 1919, I started following him hither and thither like the proverbial pot around the fisherman's waist. Consequently, the hold of purdah gradually became less severe.[81]

Nurunnessa traced the beginning of her literary career to the exposure received on these journeys.

Marriage to the new professional gentry thus offered a different life style for the women of the early twentieth century. The high point of married life was still the birth of a male child. Some form of confinement for the pregnant women and delivery rituals may have been practised, but probably not to the same degree of extremities as implied by the traditional concept of an *atur ghar* (see Chap. II). Moreover, the practice of separation as implied by the *atur ghar* became more difficult to observe as families took to living in crowded cities such as Calcutta or Dhaka where a large house with a compound would often be beyond the reach of the middle class city-dweller.

It was very unlikely for middle or upper class women to chose their own husbands, though a few like Fazilatunnessa did. Excepting Faizunnessa, Fatema Khanum, Akhtar Mahal and Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, most of the women mentioned above seemed to have led reasonably happy married lives.[82] Rokeya, from whose writings any reference to her personal life is hard to elicit, allowed herself perhaps only one brief allusion to the

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[81]Nurunnessa Khatun, Preface to "Swapnadrishta," *Nurunnessa Granthabali*, p.iv

[82]However, at least two *bhadromohila*: (now in their seventies) in their interviews denied such happiness and regretted the absence of alternative options in their lives.

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emotional emptiness in her life - in a letter. For the greater part of her life she was neither wife (her husband died within a couple of years after her marriage) nor mother (her baby died shortly after birth), nor daughter (she seldom referred to her father).

Widowhood was a calamity but not a curse. According to Islamic Shariat, a woman could marry again. But as reformist projects of the nineteenth century attest, widow remarriage among the upper or *sharif* class had lost favour. Thus Munshi Meherullah had to start a campaign for widow remarriage in the early twentieth century. Begum Sufia Kamal did remarry after the death of her first husband. Both Rokeya and Monwara Khatun were widowed, but did not remarry. Mamlukul Fatema Khanam was separated from her husband by her own choice for the greater part of her married life after his conversion to intense religiosity, *pir*-ism.

Dissolution of Marriage

Theoretically, a Muslim marriage may be terminated if either partner fails in his or her conjugal duties (though the Koran makes it clear that is not favoured unless absolutely necessary). Technically, dissolution of marriage (where a marriage is dissolved or declared void) is to be differentiated from divorce or *talaq* where a party moves for the termination.

Though polygamy is mentioned only once in the Koran, repudiation of marriage is the subject of many verses e.g. *Sura* 2, Verse nos. 227, 229. "But legally speaking the most significant reference to the institution of repudiation is probably verse 20 of the fourth sura".[83] This verse allowed capricious interpretations leading to light hearted, easy and whimsical decisions on part of the male to severe the marital bond. Verse 231 of Sura 2 warns against abuse of the provisions. Over time a discourse

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[83]Mernissi, *Beyond*, p.49

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on divorce developed allowing various stands. *Islamic Sharia*, as it developed over the centuries, was rather unique among the world religions in that it granted women the right to divorce, albeit a 'conferred' or 'delegated' one.[84]

In reality very few women had the delegated 'divorce right' (*talaki taufid*) as it would have to be entered into the marriage contract. Culturally, raising the issue of divorce at weddings was (and still is) considered inauspicious in *bhadro* society. However, legally the right existed and that was a theoretical gain at least. As Mernissi pointed out, the technique of delegation was significant because of the mechanism and concepts involved in it positing that self-determinism could be transferred from men to women.

Hunter compiling his statistical accounts of Noakhali district around 1875 commented: "... The collector says that divorces are rare, specially when there are children."[85] This official review of divorce was not shared by reformers, judging by their preoccupation with the issue as evinced in early twentieth century writings. Of course, divorce here meant the *male* right and its abuse.

By 1900, reformism gained ground and contemporary periodicals were much taken up with the matter of divorce. *Islam Pracharak* raised the issue of ill-treatment of wives in 1909, deploring the fact that Muslims were treating, their wives as any other *mal* or property and divorced them on the most trivial grounds. Such behaviour the article commented "was not

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[84]For a discussion of various methods and theories of divorce in Islamic law, see Asaf Fyzee, *Outlines of Muhammadan Law*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[85]W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Accounts of Bengal* Vol VI Noakhali, p.280.

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countenanced by the Quran, Hadith or Fiqh."[86] In a similar vein, *Al Eslam* lamented in 1919 that it was common practice for husbands to beat or divorce their wives simply because there was either too much or two little salt in the curry.

An interesting insight into the contemporary discourse on divorce may be gleaned from a series of articles and counter articles published in Al Eslam through 1917-1918. The first, a series of three articles were titled 'Talak' (Divorce). The author considered the custom of easy divorce, leading to its high incidence, a gross misinterpretation of Koranic injunctions. The writer skillfully developed a discourse on the subject, commending the 'humaneness' of *sharia* provisions but condemning their abuse.[87]

It was Mohammad Akram Khan who in 1927 first broached an issue quite daring for the time — the right of women to divorce.[88] Women from the time of Faizunnessa had found means to circumvent unhappy marriages by socially accepted states of separation. This may not (as in Faizunnessa's case) or may have (as in Fatema Khanam's case) entailed economic hardship depending on the class of the person involved. In 1939 however the state took it upon itself to intervene in Muslim family law by a divorce legislation. The colonial government had not since the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, interfered in the domain of the family. But in 1939 it passed 'The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act'. Formerly, the courts following Hanafi school of law had denied Muslim women the rights of

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[86] Mohammad K. Chand, "Talak ba Moslem Stree Barjan", (Bengali) (Talak or Rejection of Muslim Wife), *Islam Pracharak*, cited in Islam, *Samoyikpatre*, p.85

[87] Mokhtar Ahmed Siddiky, 'Talak' (Bengali),(Divorce) *Al Eslam*,4:3; 4:9;4:10, Shraban, Poush and Magh 1325, pp.425-488

[88] Mohammad Akram Khan ,"Eslame Narir Maryada", (Bengali) (Status of Women in Islam), *Masik Mohammadi*, Poush 1334 BS, cited in Islam., p.86.

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dissolution available to them under certain circumstances under other schools of the *Sharia.* After a good deal of public agitation Kazi Muhammad Ahmad Kazim introduced the bill in the central legislature in April 1936. The bill became law three years later and has been hailed as one of the most progressive enactments passed by the Indian legislature. The Act restored to a Muslim wife her lost right of judaical separation from a husband under certain circumstances and abolished all barriers between different sects and schools of Muslims, by Codification of the law pertaining to dissolution.[89] The speech made it clear that Hanafi jurists had now agreed to allow women the rights accorded them by the Maliki, Shafayee and Hambali schools. Like many other colonial legislative measures affecting women (e.g., *Sati*, widow remarriage, child marriage), there were many conditions and clauses. The act like the acts on the above issues, was in conformity with authoritative texts (i.e. the *Sharia* as codified by juristic schools. Though the law upheld scriptural authority, in one sense it laid a basis for a future change, even violation, of that authority as evinced by a much later enactment which built upon it, the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 in Pakistan. Clause 11(a) of section 2 of this ordinance enabled wives to move for a dissolution in cases of husband's acts of polygamy if they so desired.

Dress and Ornaments

As woman's role changed and she got access to the world outside the home, her dress and appearance too became objects of reform. Women's dress in the traditional Hindu andarmahal of the well to do was a light sari worn without undergarments which gave a semi-transparent look.[90] The Brahmo

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[89]For details of the Act and its conditions, see A. A. Fyzee, *Outline of Muhammadan Law*.

[90]See Borthwick, pp.243-256.

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dress reform which laid great emphasis on 'covering' the body with more clothing was largely influenced by the puritan reaction of the English missionaries and colonists to such scanty attire.

Distinctions were drawn along lines of class and culture in the mode of dress adopted by Muslims. Ibrahim Khan had observed: "Among the poorer classes lengths of cloth called 'gamcha' were much in use. Village women wore coarse woven saris. Men and women of *bhadro* [sic] families wore *dhotis* and *saris* then as they do now."[91] The writer referred to well-to-do rural households. Only *munshis* (secretaries) and *maulvis* (religious leaders) wore the 'lungi' favoured by peasants in East Bengal (which later became the most popular dress in the region). The *maulvis* and those who considered themselves *Ashraf* as against *Atraf*, had their own dress code — a throwback from Mughal times - loose trousers (*pajama)*, tunic (*choga)*, vest coat (*chapkan*) etc., topped by a *topi* or cloth hat. The *dhoti* was considered a typically Hindu dress - but many New Muslims took to wearing it.

A similar political and class dimension insidiously crept into women's attire. Though the picture is far from clear, women of high *sharif* culture seemed to favour the dress imported from northern India (such as *kurta, shalwar, churidar, gharara, dopatta*, etc.) rather than the indigenous *sari*. Several interviewees remember remnants of these 'north Indian' dresses in old trunks, and tales of marriages where brides wore such garb.[92] This mode of dress was however, limited to a very confined elite.[93]

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[91]Ibrahim Khan, p.108.

[92]Interviews with Mrs. Sufia Kamal and Mrs. Rahima Khatun, April and September, 1992.

[93]Women of the 'Nawab' families favoured both North Indian dress and saris, e.g., Shaista Ikramullah's family and women of the Dhaka Nawab family such as Zulekha Bano.

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None other than James Wise, the British commentator whose work is much esteemed, recorded the Islamization in dress reform which was taking place in the latter half of the nineteenth century with a certain nostalgia:

> Of late years they [Bengali women] have laid aside the graceful sari and adopted a jacket with long sleeves which does not add to their comeliness.[94]

The prejudice toward 'non-Islamic' garments was articulated by some publicists who took part in the 'politics of dress' in those days. Opinions were expressed against wearing of saris (though, admittedly this opinion was not widespread). Meherulla (of Khulna) in his manual *Islam Kaumudi* published in 1914 recommended that women should give up wearing 'half-nude' or 'Bengali' dress and take to Arabian or Turkish attire.[95] This strain of thinking continued for some time.

The *Behesti Zewar* had declared that 'western garments' were *na-jayez* (not allowed in scriptures). When the text was translated into Bengali in 1961, the particular passage was transmuted thus: "Wearing of Saris by women is a violation of *Sunna* (that which is desirable because of its advocacy by Prophet Muhammad)".[96] Moreover, he pointed out, Bibi Fatema, and Hazrat Ayesha never wore the sari.

An article in *Islam Darshan* (1925) pointed out that not only menfolk, but Muslim girls of good family were rejecting traditional dress such as 'ijer-tahban', 'kurta-chadar' with relief in favour of "fine, semi-transparent saris from Farashdanga" and modelling themselves on Hindu heroines in

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[94]James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1883), p.30.

[95]Mehrullah, *Islam Kaumudi*, cited in Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manos* , p.312.

[96]Bengali trans. of *Behesti Zewar* by Maulana Shamsul Huque, (Dhaka: Emdadiya library , 1961) Vol 3, p.231.

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novels. But, the writer added in a note of praise for the Brahmo and Hindu models: "But alas! Where is the high ideal of Ashalata or Anupama in her life? She has managed to emulate only their attire. More than this she failed to absorb."[97]

Such opinions revealed that there was a section in society, however small, that perceived woman's dress as a symbol of tradition and identity and was unwilling to relinquish the authority that would determine its mode and style to the 'Bengalicized' camp. Dress, to a degree lesser than in language, was a contested site for ethnicity and identity. The issue, like many other apparently innocuous matters, was politically potent.

The process of modernization among Bengal Muslims, concomitant with the growth of a middle class, also effected a cultural transformation (termed 'Bengalicization'). A new dress code came into being with the emergence of the new Muslim middle class — which was modelled, to a large extent, on the reformed dress of Brahmo men and women. Men took to a long shirt or tunic and *pyjama, chadar* or shawl, the more westernized ones favoured western dress — trousers, shirt, coat, bow-tie, etc. Women went for the Brahmika sari, the chemise, the jacket, etc.

In the sketch of Nawab Faizunnessa drawn by a contemporary, she was shown wearing a *sari*, and a long sleeved chemise. Petticoats and shoes soon came into vogue. By the 1920's the *sari* was adopted both by the middle and upper class and families hitherto conscious about their 'sharif' status accepted the indigenous forms of dress.

Rokeya and Mrs M. Rahman had also deplored the semitransparent Farashdanga saris and uppergarments worn by the dweller of the traditional

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[97] Eshak Mia B.A., "Mussalman Chhatrer Hindu Bhab", (Bengali) (Muslim Students' Hindu Airs), *Islam Darshan*, Ashwin 1332 BS, cited in Islam, *Samoyikpatre*, pp.74-75.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

andarmahal. But unlike the male writers above, they advocated the *reformed dress* of Brahmo women — the jacket, the Brahmika sari, the chemise, petticoat and shoes. By the early twentieth century, most of the Muslim educated women of the emergent middle class looked very similar to the Brahmo and Hindu *bhadromohila.*

That such attire was also popular among the Muslim *bhadromohila* was (indirectly) attested by Khairunnessa's appeal (1905) to Bengali women to forsake foreign goods in support of the *Swadeshi* Movement:

> Sisters, come let us pledge to discard foreign made saris. The English bodice, chemise and socks should not gain favour anymore. Let us use rose scent instead of lavender perfume and free ourselves from stumbling in a lady shoe [sic]... Let us take to handloom and silk saris from Bombay, Dhaka, Pabna, Murshidabad and Nadia.[98]

The one item of clothing quite unique to Muslim women was the *burqa* — which surprisingly was also a part of dress reform. An amalgam of cloak, hood and veil, it was essentially a travelling garb meant to be worn over regular clothes. No respectable woman of the nineteenthth century would step out of the *andar* without it. Though it had evolved from certain items of covering in Western Asia like the veil and the *chadar*, it was a peculiar innovation of Muslims in India.[99]

The *burqa* as a 'reformist' innovation came into use in India when women of the upper class started to appear in public. Formerly women who performed public functions did so behind a curtain (purdah) and in their public appearances wore a veil. For instance, Munno Jan the 18th century

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[98]Khairunnessa, "Swadesh Anurag", *Nabanur*, 3:6, 278, Ashwin 1312 BS.

[99]See Ameer Ali's description of its evolution from the 13th century A.D. in "The Influence", p.762.

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zamindar of Hughly. There are no references to the *burqa* in connection with these horseback riding women. One must infer that it was designed for the 'modern' reformed woman who may now be needed to step out into the outside world. Thanawi recommended its use on these occasions. It was paradoxically both a device of liberation and bondage. It was designed for the woman who had to traverse the world of men (no need of a *burqa* in the women's quarters). Simultaneously, it was also meant to render the woman 'invisible' to the male eye, in keeping with perceived Koranic injunctions. The *burqa* was a hallmark of women of the upper and emergent middle classes. Lower class women then as always could dispense with the niceties of genteel modesty. But no *sharif* woman would be caught dead without it. We can find an extreme example of this in one of the episodes of *Aborodhbasini* (1928), Rokeya's diatribe against purdah. In the said episode, a lady fell on the rail-tracks and her *burqa* got so entangled that she could not free it, nor would she discard it and show her face in the light of day. She preferred death. Though part of Rokeya's polemics, the episodes of *Aborodhbasini* to a large extent reflected the reality. In another of her essays titled "Burqa", Rokeya defended the attire perhaps partly out of a strategic desire to survive in conservative society. However, it must be pointed out that Rokeya was fighting distorted notions and practice of purdah; she always believed in female modesty.

When Najibar Rahman wrote *Goriber Meye*, the *burqa* was a hallmark of respectablity coupled with modernity in the Muslim community. That is why there was quite a stir among the girls in the village school when the heroine Nuri, newly wed, clad in a *burqa* and decked with ornaments, came to class for the first time after her marriage: "The next day there was quite a stir around noon at the girl's school, when a girl arrived with a maid, wearing a coloured *burqa*. The garment is not so prevalent in rural areas, and so none had seen one. There was a wild rush to catch a glimpse

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of the girl clad in a strange apparel."[100] Nuri felt considerable discomfort at donning the new apparel. But her husband comforted her: "Don't let that bother you,... The ignorant and seflish always criticize innovations. You may go to school without embarrasment. Muslim bhadromohila [sic] have been using the *burqa* from ancient times. It is a beautiful device for the preservation of Purdah."[101]

Women, from Faizunnessa to Rokeya, donned the *burqa* when stepping out of the *andar*. Mrs Mehrunnessa in an article described the attire of her mother Malekunessa (1885-1975) — a sari, chemise, brooch and *burqa*.[102] Razia Khatun's *burqa* was rather 'fashionably' made: "It was styled after Queen Victoria's official dress. It had a black petticoat trimmed with lace, a coat with sleeves also black, and a white lace veil.[103]

The *burqa* was thought indispensable till certainly the 1930's. When Shamsunnahar went to her classes at Calcutta's Diocesan Collegee she wore the *burqa*.[104] It was only in the 1940s that Muslim *bhadromohila* gradually started discarding it. By that time, the burqa had served its purpose in a time of transition.

The changing logos in the women's section in popular periodicals sometimes furnish one of the finest indicators of changes in dress style. For instance, *Saogat*, the mouthpiece of the progressive section, captioned its women's page 'Zanana Mahfil' in 1928 (while at the same time the competing

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[100]Najibar Rahman, *Goriber Meye*, (Bengali) (Poor Man's Daughter), (first pub. 1923; Dhaka: Ananda Prakshan, 1988), p.28.

[101]ibid., p.31.

[102]M. Islam, "Story of Three Generations", *The Bangladesh Observer*, Dhaka 1982.

[103]Interview, Safura Hussain.

[104]Shahida Parveen, p. 23.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

journal *Masik Mohammadi* settled on the intermediate between Bengali and Urdu, 'Mohila Mahfil') and showed in its logo a couple of women sitting in the *andarmahal* in Persianized or north Indian attire, with the head covered. In 1940, however, the section title of the same journal changed to 'Mohila Jagot' (the World of Women) — and the new logo showed a woman in sari, head uncovered, sitting in a car!

Kazi Nazrul Islam held many beliefs similiar to Rokeya's on the question of women's emancipation. Culturally the Bengali poet was a syncretist — he had married a Hindu *bhadromohila* — though he also believed like other liberals of the period that Muslims needed to believe in the glory of their past. Politically and economically, he dreamed of an oppression free society based on egalitarianism. What Rokeya formulated in pedagogic prose, he expressed in fiery verse.

In one of her earlier essays "Alonkar na badge of slavery [sic]?" (Ornaments or Badges of Slavery?), Rokeya condemned the use of jewellery with her usual rhetoric. She observed that ornaments were trinkets distributed by men to women for the latter's favours — a paltry payment that belittled their status. Rokeya enjoined women to eschew such bribes. From the aesthetic point of view, too, ornaments according to Rokeya were signs of the uncivilized. A poem by Nazrul echoed the sentiment (though he also wrote many songs and poems celebrating the bejewelled woman's beauty):

> Which tyrant holds you captive, woman, in silver and gold?
> That you cannot raise your head, look straight in the eye?
> Bracelets and anklets weigh you down.
> O' fling aside your veil, break those glittering bonds.[105]

The sophisticated *bhadromohila*, it is true, would not weigh herself down

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[105]Kazi Nazrul Islam, *Nazrul Rachanavali*, (Bengali),(Collected Works of Nazrul), Vol II, Abdul Qader (ed), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1969), p.17.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

with jewellery, though it continued to be in great favour among women. Most pictures of Brahmo women show them wearing tasteful ear-rings, a chain or pearl string over their blouse, a brooch pinned onto the sari at the shoulder, and bangles of gold and conch shell (if married). Photographs of Rokeya, Fatema and Razia Khatun show them without jewellery. Rokeya of course was a widow and Fatema separated. Married *bhadromohila* when young did wear some jewellery specially on festive occasions.

That women coveted jewellery was not surprising in that they were her only economic asset, as well as beauty aid. Najibar Rahman's heroine Nuri was "resplendent in her finery and her jewels" even at school. Various ornaments are even described by name in the book.

In an essay 'Alonkar', published in 1920 in *Al Eslam*, Musammat Tambia Khatun expressed a view similar to Rokeya's. Tambia reminisced about their teacher 'Guru-ma' at the village school who while teaching them the use of ornamental language in their grammer class, pointed out the difference between 'ornaments of gold' and 'ornaments of language'. The 'guru ma' pointed out to an enthralled audience that the advanced nations of the West were not so covetous of ornaments as Indians were. Tambia never forgot her teacher's injunction:

> Dear students, when you grow up to be mothers, remember to adorn your children with those ornaments which are enduring — manners, graces, learning...[106]

Thanawi, too, had made similar recommendations in his book. In fact the title itself, *Behesti Zewar*, means heavenly ornament and the rhetoric of the title was such that it could mean both pieces of good advice and the priceless product of the advice, i.e. the reconstructed woman. The author starts

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[106] Tambia Khatun, "Alonkar" (Bengali) (Ornaments), in *Al Eslam*, 6:7, 364, Kartik, 1327 BS.

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his book with the advice of a mother to her daughter:

> Darling child, the glitter of gold and silver is useless.
> Therefore, adorn yourself with real or heavenly ornaments.
> The jhumar (head-ornament) should be of wisdom,
> The earrings - religion, the necklace of pious deeds,
> The armlet - diligence and labour of strong hands.
> No precious metal should adorn your feet,
> But see that they never slip from the path of truth.[107]

Transition to Nuclear Type Families

A glance at the period of four decades (1900-1939) reveals that significiant changes occurred in the institution of the family, its structures and ideology. The entire framework of the Muslim family was transformed under the impact of new socio-economic changes and the rise of a new domestic ideology that accompanied them.

As traditional structures broke down, the extended family gave way to nuclear type families the bride was invested with a new role which differed from the one played by her mother or mother-in-law. Marriage to a government servant or professional was a very different proposition from marriage to a member of the former landed or administrative gentry. With the new role came new skills and gender relations encouraged often by the men themselves. The very concept of domestic life changed. Homemaking now became an important matter and manuals appeared on the stalls to teach the new housewife (or the young wife to be) the fine art of caring for a home, husband and children. For many women such changes may have brought a new sense of liberty, specially the changes in conjugal norms. Companionship and love between marriage partners now became an establi-

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[107]Thanawi, *Behesti Zewar* (Urdu), (Karachi: Rahman Brothers, n.d.), p.22.

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shed norm and society created a space for it. The new relationships and roles resembled Victorian and Brahmo models but there was also much that was indigenous and different.

Governmental legislation aided the process of structural change in the family - specially with regard to child marriage, age of consummation, and divorce. Polygamy remained outside state jurisdiction, but societal attitudes had taken a turn against polygamy and concubinage. Consequently, the practice began to die out in urban centres. The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act of 1939 was the coping stone to the new edifice.

All these changes concerned a new personality, the *bhadromohila*, in Muslim society. The new woman required a new look, as evinced in dress reform of Muslim ladies from the *andarmahal* attire to the *Brahmika* sari, chemise, blouse and footwear, as well as a new upbringing, viz education. In the meantime, the education system had undergone tremendous changes under colonial rule. Changes in the home which had formerly been the site of education now became so profound that it pushed its denizens outward toward a novel form of institutional education. Changes outside, too, acted like a magnet and drew *andarmahal* dwellers out of their confines toward some great centre outside in the world. The first stopping place on this outward journey for women was to be the centres of learning.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

CHAPTER IV
RISE OF FORMAL EDUCATION

Changes in the institution of the family at the beginning of the twentieth century were not isolated from the changes occurring in other domains such as education. The need for the institutionally educated woman was generated by needs which first manifest themselves within the domestic sphere. The lifestyle of the middle class salariat provided the context for women who were trained in the new strategies of domesticity - the thrift and efficiency required to run a nuclear household unaided by elderly mothers-in-law, the enlightenment to offer companionship to a husband isolated from the former circle of family and friends, the graces to survive in the world of 'native' officialdom and the capability to train sons and daughters for the new world. While the *andarmahal* itself was undergoing significant transformation, traditional education imparted there was no longer deemed adequate.

Education in the form that it has taken today was introduced by the British and assumed importance because of its colonial policies. British policies in the economic, political, judicial or educational spheres were undertaken from the perspective of colonial rule, i.e. whether or not a particular policy "advanced or impeded the spread or stability of that rule." The British project of promoting education in India thus stemmed not so much from altruistic motives to improve the mind, morality or material lot of Indians, than from the colonists' need to create a class of *westernized* Indians to serve them.[1]

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[1]See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990); Rajat Kanta Ray, "The Raj, the Congress and the Bengali Gentry 1880-1905", in Basudeb Chattopadhyay et al. (eds) *Dissent and Consensus: Protest in Pre-industrial Societies* (Calcutta: K.P.Bagchi and Co., 1989)

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In order to make an impact in the new economic or political sphere, it no longer sufficed for men to receive the traditional education that had been imparted for centuries. Realizing that if it were to share in public and economic life, it was crucial to come out of the cocoon where the dis-empowered Muslim polity had taken shelter after 1857, Muslim leaders, in Calcutta, Dhaka, Hughli and other cities, had launched an all round Reform Movement inspired significantly by the ideas emanating from Aligarh. Educational Reform and Women's Reform were important items on this agenda. Emerging from the mists of the aftermath of 1857, the new middle class gentry set about the task of modernization fast - acquiring new skills through western education, improving the conditions of women including their education, and redressing social ills. Education for the 'new man' (and later the 'new woman') could be provided only by institutions re-formed along western lines.

One of the first issues that assumed significance for women in India in what came to be recognized as the Women's Reform Movement, was the right to education. Education and literature were, in fact the two arenas where the Women's Question manifest itself in nineteenth century Bengal.[2] As changes in the private sphere produced contradictions in woman's traditional role, these contrary pulls coalesced around the issue of education seeking a new resolution there. It was thus the first great mediator for women between the home and the world. It was, unlike the family, a region where there was scope for governmental intervention - an intervention which led to the formation of supporting and opposing groups among the local populace and the heated debates (see Chap. V). The entire issue was not just one of how many girls attended school in a particular locality.

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[2]Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Zed press, 1986), p.85

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Education was the site where changing norms and notions regarding purdah, female sexuality, the 'true' nature of woman, her role within the home and without, - were all to be spelled out.

To the reforming Bengali mind, education, apart from being a means to a profitable career (for men), was a panacea for many social evils of the day — a wishful cure for the maladies perceived all around. In the great era of Hindu Reform, men such as Akshay Kumar Dutt and Vidyasagar had consistently built the case for female education on the foundation of the home. Akshay's *Dharma Niti* was one of the first tracts on the issue:

> ...there emerges from the author of *Dharma Niti*, far more than from any other Bengali writer, the rational justification for making female education and emancipation the central issue of Hindu social reform. As Akshay Kumar reviewed the social evils in the Bengali family, he found that almost all derived from the servile and oppressed condition of the women in the household. Here then must social reform begin, and it must begin through education.[3]

The success of the first phase of educational reform was marked by the founding of Bethune Female School in Calcutta in 1849. The students were mostly Brahmo, Hindu and Christian. By some importunate clause in its constitution Muslim girls were not allowed admission as late as 1897. Not that Muslim girls would have flocked there in large numbers. The Muslim Community took a back seat as the major urban centres made notable advances in female education. Moreover in this case there were some special deterrents. Generally men were required to acquire an 'English education' it was felt, as a means to earning a livelihood. This impetus was absent in the case of upper/middle class women for it was unheard of that they work. The other deterrents were moral in nature. They came in the form

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[3]Cited in David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.53.

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of a perceived threat to the system of regulation of female sexuality. Firstly, an education was seen as being conductive to female intransigence; an educated girl was less amenable to obedience, and less disposed to household duties. An education report recorded the remarks of a district official in Assam regarding prevalent anxiety on the matter:

> ...parents think they [girls]... despise ordinary household duties if they learn how to read and write. Girls thus qualified are also said to become *dushta* [bad], which I imagine means they are less amenable to discipline and less likely to submit to parents' choice of husbands.[4]

Secondly, it was feared education would involve contravention of *purdah*. As observed by another colonial officer: "In the case of the higher class, it is impossible to get a number of adult females together, as to form a school, lest they should be exposed to the observation of strangers."[5]

As stated above, the Muslim community had withdrawn into its own shell following the uprising of 1857 and its aftermath. This voluntary withdrawal from the political and public scene, was accompanied by increased conservatism and reinforcement of traditional values and practices in the private sphere which affected women adversely. They now became the repository of tradition and became a fresh symbol of purity. (Paradoxically, it was toward this refuge, this retreat of the private sphere, that the first reform move was directed. Men both turned their gaze *on* and turned *to*, the *andarmahal* for regeneration (see Chap.I). A decade after 1857, a conservative Muslim leader was to express categorical disapproval of female education

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[4] *Progress of Education in India 1887-88 to 1891-92 (The Second Quinquennial Review)*, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1893), p. 277

[5] Note by E.C. Bailey, Secretary, Govt. of India, dated June 22, 1867, cited in Y. B. Mathur, *Women's Education In India*, (Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1973), p.33

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at a public meeting in Calcutta [see below] the ground being the same: *purdah*. Thus initially education was viewed by many as a means for loosening the control exercised by society over women. It is for this reason that it was such a central point in the struggle for women's rights. And for this that any advance would have to be made carefully within the existing framework of religion and tradition.

The conservatism of Muslim society regarding female education was voiced at a meeting of the Bengal Social Science Association in Calcutta, where Nawab Abdul Lateef was reading a paper on Muslim education. In the discussion which ensued, Peary Chand Mitra enquired if similar efforts at female education were under way in the Muslim community as in the Hindu. The reply came from Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Calcutta Madrasa. He is reported to have said that the scriptures had ordained education for both boys and girls and to this end many Muslim women were renowned throughout history for their learning. But such education was imparted within the home. It was unthinkable that Muslim girls, following the example set by girls in other communities, should go outside the home for education violating the purdah enjoined by religion, Abdul Hakim had concluded. Abdul Lateef, as far as the record goes, did not say anything.[6]

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-98), the great pioneer of the Aligarh Movement and founder of a college for Muslim boys (1875), was ambivalent about female education. His opinion on the matter was circumscribed by the backward condition of the Muslim community in general:

> The fact is, that no satisfactory education can be provided for Mohammedan females until a large number of Mohammedan males receive a sound education. The present state of education among

[6]Kazi Abdul Wadud, *Banglar Jagaran*, (Bengali), (The Bengal Awakening), (Calcutta: Viswabharati Granthalay, 1956) p.22 .

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> Mohammedan females is, in my opinion, enough for domestic happiness considering the present social and economic conditions of the life of the Mohammedans in India.[7]

Syed Ahmed was not opposed to female education as such, but probably thought the time was not yet ripe considering the socio-economic status of Muslims. The liberal movement which he pioneered so laboriously and in the teeth of great opposition, had far-reaching influence. Aligarh was a haven for aspiring Muslims in Bengal which sent many of her sons to the school and college there. Sir Syed had many followers who took up the issue of female education with more vigour and clarity than himself — Altaf Hussain Hali, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and his wife Mohammadi Begum, Syed Mahmud and Sheikh Abdullah. They advocated girls schools (Sheikh Abdullah set up a girls' school at Aligarh), teacher's training schools, published the first women's journals, (*Khatun* from Aligarh, *Tahzibun Niswan* from Lahore, *Pardanasin* from Agra, *Ismat* from Delhi) etc. In their writings, Rokeya Sakhawat, Shamsunnahar and other reformers in Bengal acknowledged the importance of Aligarh in the life of modern Muslims. They emulated the system devised by Sir Syed.

Syed Ameer Ali's views, on the other hand, were more cognizant of the changes occurring around him. In fact of the two notable leaders in the Muslim Community in Bengal, Nawab Abdul Lateef and Syed Ameer Ali, the latter's views on female emancipation may be deemed more favorable though both spoke on behalf of a small, Persianized, urban elite, whose culture was cut off from the masses. Deploring the degraded status of women in his community Ameer Ali commented:

> There are women in Northern India whose attainments, I admit, are

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[7]Syed Ahmed Khan, cited in G. F. I. Graham, *The Life and Works of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan*, (first pub. 1885; 2nd edition, London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1909) p.224.

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> high in Arabic and Persian, but... in these days their knowledge is sterile. So long as their minds run in the old groove,... there can be no prospect of progress.[8]

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION IN BENGAL

It is difficult to generalize about the form of traditional education in Bengal at the turn of the last century because it varied according to class and cultural setting. Where one household might favour the study of Urdu another might be more disposed to Bengali. Urdu texts were popular in many Bengali homes but they were gradually replaced by translations or indigenous texts. Then again, some families might have opted for more classic works such as Bukhari's *Sahi Hadith* over local versions. One would also encounter varying degrees of secularism in the curricula and relaxation in the constraints of purdah. In spite of this, one could, however, on the basis of an abstracted picture complemented with class and culture variations drawn from real-life accounts, construe a 'typical' education imparted to girls in a late nineteenth century household.

Traditionally, Muslim women received the rudiments of education within the strict privacy of the *andarmahal*. On occasion, specially among the upper aristocracy or *ashraf*, the quality could be very high and equivalent to that received by boys. Girls would be 'put in purdah' from the age of 7 or so. The *aborodh-basini* or dwellers in seclusion, received elementary education mostly of a religious and moral nature. *Ustadnis* or female tutors were sometimes employed to teach girls how to read the Koran, some Urdu /Persian and basic accounting skills. As the old *Shurafa* began to be replaced by the new gentry, Bengali was added to the list. In some cases female tutors were also employed to teach English, a little sewing and embroidery

[8]Ameer Ali, "The Influence of women in Islam", in *The Nineteenth Century*, (May, 1989), p.773.

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but seldom Music. (This was more popular among the Brahmos, Hindus and Christians, whose domestic culture incorporated music). The education was geared to equip girls for their future roles of wife and mother - to train them in ideal female conduct.

Shaista Ikramullah's account of traditional female education in her family below, was corroborated, almost reiterated, by other female narrators:

> My mother's education followed the orthodox pattern. She was taught to read the Koran by one of the many distant relatives who lived in the house. In a household like my grandfather these ladies occupied the position of superior governesses or seamstresses. After learning to read and write in Urdu... cooking and sewing were considered the important items of girls' education.[9]

As a segment of the community came into closer contact with westernizing influences through education, jobs etc., and the process of cultural adaptation set in among Bengal Muslims, it became fashionable at first among the upper class to keep 'mem' teachers or governesses. These teachers were mostly Anglo-Indian or native-christian women of modest means who had also played a part in the making of the Brahmo *Bhadromohila*. Elite families (such as the Dhaka Nawab family) kept governesses for their daughters in imitation of Victorian England. Consequently, their skills included accounting, languages, embroidery, and even horse-riding. Peri Bano, Nawab Ahsanullah's daughter, had all these skills.[10] But this was not the average Bengali girl's fate and for her life behind *aborodh* could be stifling.

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[9]Ikramullah, p.8.

[10]Interview with Mrs Sarwar Khan.

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NINETEENTH CENTURY EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The development of female education in Bengal followed four broad courses, not always in chronological order.[11]

The Christian missionaries in Bengal were the pioneers in the field.[12] In their project of 'redeeming lost souls' and expanding the dominion of Christianity, they realized that education could play a significant role. Before the lull in the period 1830-1870, there were several attempts at female education in the metropolis (Calcutta), Dhaka and a few other regions. Surprising though it may seem, Muslim girls were visible in the earliest projects in female education in Calcutta, undertaken at the behest of Christian missionaries — often in conjunction with local residents.[13] *Samachar Darpan* (1820) in its December 27 issue stated: "At 10 o'clock in the morning of Friday... an examination was held at Gouribari, Calcutta. About 150 Hindu and Muslim girls participated in the examination."[14] This must have been one of the examinations of the Juvenile School, a missio-

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[11]For discussion of female education in 19th century Bengal, see: Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, *Sangbadpatre Sekaler Katha*, (Bengali) (Past times through periodicals and paper), 3rd edition (Calcutta, 1356); Jogesh Chandra Bagal, *Banglar Stree Shiksha* (Bengali) (Female education in Bengal), (Calcutta: Viswabharati Granthalay, 1357 B.S.); M. Azizul Huq, *History and Problems of Muslim Education in Bengal*, (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1917). Also see, Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role*; Ghulam Murshid, *The Reluctant Debutante*.

[12]See M.A. Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal 1793-1837*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) for a detailed discussion.

[13]For a history of early schools in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal see M.A. Laird, *Missionaries and Education*; Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India 1793-1837*, and *The History of Serampore and its Missionaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

[14]Cited in Brajendronath Bandyopadhyay, *Sangbad patre*, p.56. Also see Rev. J. Long, *Adam's Reports on Vernacular Education in Bengal and Bihar*, (Calcutta; Home Secretariat Press,1868), for details of early schools in Calcutta.

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nary enterprise conducted under the aegis of the Female Juvenile Society at Gouribari. A similar examination was held the following year.

The second initiative came from company officials and British residents in Bengal. The third important advocate of female education was a section of the urban elite in Bengal, the rising *bhadrolok* class itself, first from the Hindu/Brahmo, then from the Muslim, community. The colonial government comprised a fourth major and powerful channel for development of education in Bengal, but its role in this sphere went through various phases.[15] In the first flush of institutional education for girls, local residents of Calcutta were by the side of the missionaries. The Central Female School Foundation was laid on 18th May, 1826, in "an aristocratic Hindu neighbourhood of Calcutta" near Cornwallis Square. Raja Baidyanath Ray had donated Rs.20,000 for the school at the request of his wife. Lady Amherst laid the stone, and the school was formally opened in 1828. According to J. C. Bagal, another missionary venture of the name of 'The Ladies Association' founded about twelve girls' schools in Calcutta around 1827. "About 160 girls studied in these schools, most of them Muslims."[16]

An English lady, Miss Mary Ann Cook founded eight schools for girls in various parts of Calcutta between 1821-22. Pricilla Chapman provides contemporary references to Muslim girl's education in her book *Hindu Female Education*, published from London in 1839. According to her Miss Cook was assisted by a Muslim lady in setting up a girls school in Shyambazar, Calcutta. This lady whose identity has never been established, set up the Shyambazar school with 18 girls. The number soon reached 45.

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[15]See Sonia Nishat Amin, "Women and Society" in Sirajul Islam (ed) *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971*, Vol. III, (Dhaka: Asiatic Society, 1992), p.736. The author provides an overview of women's education in Bengal through 1750-1970.

[16]Bagal, *Banglar Stree Shiksha*, p.5. The author added that Muslim girls did not study for long.

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> Many will find this enthusiasm on part of a Muslim mohila [sic] for female education quite amazing given that the men of that community in Calcutta were not well disposed to the education system of the English. For a Muslim lady to be inspired by such zeal.., was indeed a wonder.[17]

Unfortunately, these schools were short-lived and a really enduring institution was not set up till 1849, when J.E.D. Bethune founded the famous school in Calcutta which still bears his name. After 1825 these initial ventures petered out as native suspicion and indignation regarding proselytization, mounted. Upper class households whether high caste Hindu or *sharif* Muslim were very slow in opening the door of institutional education to their female wards. The enrollment at these schools was mostly from the lower to middling strata as well as from the native christian community.

By the second half of the nineteenth century the local populace's attitude to female education had hardened, due in great measure to the proselytizing aspect of missionary schools. But in the 1870s women's education, more specifically, that of Hindu and Brahmo women, received a boost. A conglomeration of events made this possible: government patronage through delegating a major share of its responsibility to the newly constituted municipalities; expansion of the Brahmo samaj which could now seriously take the matter in hand; and mobilization among the local people. The government had started taking an interest in the matter approximately some time after Wood's Education Despatch of 1854. But the uprising of 1857 made it very wary of moving too fast in the direction of education (or other) reform and the women's cause received a temporary set-back. But the parallel, local ventures did not stop and in many instances these inadequately funded and ill attended schools were all that there was.

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[17] Binoy Ghose, *Vidyasagar*, pp.213-214

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Normal Schools: Calcutta

Attempts to establish female normal schools from the 1850s onwards met with varying success. The names of two English ladies who came to Bengal in the 1860s and 1870s with the desire of promoting female education have become a part of the history of this region: Miss Mary Carpenter (who came in 1866) and Miss Annette Akroyd (1872). Miss Carpenter felt the acute need of opening a Female Normal School where women teachers could be trained. Though the locals (such as Vidyasagar) did not think this a good-idea at the time, the government at Miss Carpenter's request opened a Female Normal School in Calcutta in 1869. It closed after three years. Keshub Chandra Sen also started the Native Ladies Normal School in 1871 with 13 pupils. This too closed down after a period. In 1886-87 there were 242 female students at the four normal schools in East Bengal. In 1899-1900 the number rose to 101. Still, most reformers felt the number was not adequate.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, greatest of the nineteenth Century reformers, inspired by the success of Bethune school, set up 35 girls' schools in Hughli, Burdwan, Nadia and Midnapur in the years 1857-58. Though the schools eventually closed down due to lack of funds and local enthusiasm, the trend had been set. Miss Mary Carpenter and Miss Annette Akroyd were welcomed at first by Brahmo progressives who aided them. Miss Akroyd's school opened in 1873 and Miss Carpenter transformed it into a college in 1876. Two years later it was merged with Bethune to become the Bethune College in Calcutta. Eden Girls school was being founded in Dhaka around the same time (see below).

It was also in the 1870s that a polarization was taking place among the *Bhadrolok* over the issue of women's emancipation:

> ...the issue was sharply drawn between those who viewed female education as preparatory for the domestic bliss of the enlightened

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housewife, and those who wanted women educated on the same basis and the same levels as men.[18]

Bethune was affiliated to Calcutta University in 1883 so that two students Kadambini Bose and Chandramukhi Bose, could become the first female recipients of the B.A. degree in Bengal.

But the advances in these decades for women of other communities were not so striking. Developments, along similar lines but somewhat modified along religious planes, occurred for Muslim girls much later, in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the last quarter of the previous century was not without its initiatives; a school for girls was founded in 1872 by a woman herself, Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, in Comilla. In 1897 a Muslim Girl's *Madrasa* was inaugurated at Calcutta by Lady Mckenzie, wife of the governor, at the behest of Nawab Shamsi Jahan Firdaus Mahal, of Murshidabad. Begum Firdaus Mahal had felt the acute need of a school for Muslim girls and provided funds for the building and a monthly grant of Rs.150. Nawab Ahsanullah of Dhaka also donated Rs.1000. In 1898, 46 girls enrolled at the *Madrasa*.

The *Bamabodhini Patrika* in its May 1896 issue mentioned 'Latifunnessa' who had passed the final examination of Campbell Medical School in Calcutta (not to be confounded with the Medical College) that year, securing second place among 55 students thereby becoming, it would appear, the first Muslim woman of Bengal to become a Licentiate of the Medical Faculty (LMF). Not much is known of her save that she was a resident of Shahzadpur. There are no existing records of her having practised as a doctor.[19]

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[18]David Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, p.34

[19]See Usha Chakrovarty, *Condition of Bengali Women around the Second Half of the 19th Century* (Calcutta: The Author, 1963) and Shahanara Hussain, "Glimpses in the condition of Bengali Muslim Women during the latter half of the nineteenth Century: A study based on the

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FROM ANDARMAHAL TO HIGH SCHOOL: FAIZUNNESSA'S PIONEERING WORK

While these sporadic efforts at female education were taking place, a Muslim woman came forward with a daring plan to set up a school for *purdanasin* girls in Comilla. This pioneer of formal education for girls in Bengal Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani inhabited the post 1857 world in which Muslims had turned their back on western education. Faizunnessa herself must have somehow come to the conclusion that there could be no hope for the community without modern education. Daughter of the prosperous Zamindar of Homnabad (near Laksham, Comilla), she had spent a happy childhood behind strict purdah and had received a good education as her mastery over Urdu, Bengali, Sanskrit and Persian, proved. Her love of knowledge persevered and in later life she spent hours secluded in her library.

At a time when scions of the Muslim Awakening, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in North India and Abdul Lateef in Bengal, hardly gave the matter much thought, Faizunnessa realized women must be by the side of men in the path to modernity. She founded three categories of educational institutions:

1) Religious schools: She established a free *madrasa* at her residence in Paschimgaon. In 1943 it was converted into the Higher Secondary Islamia College, and the Gazi Atia Madrasa.

2) Boy's schools: Faizunnessa established primary schools for boys in four of her *mouzas*. The nawab was aided by her daughter Badrunnessa in setting up the Nawab Faizunnessa and Badrunnessa High School (for Boys). At first a middle English School, it was raised to the status of a high school under Calcutta University in 1909.

3) Girl's schools: Two primary schools for girls were founded in Comilla town by Faizunnessa. One on the bank of Nanua Dighi, the other - her

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Bamabodhini Patrika", *Journal of the institute of Development Studies*, Rajshahi, Vol. III, 1978

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

most abiding work in the field - at Kandirpar in 1873.

The Nanua Dighi school now bears the name of some other illustrious woman and is called the Shailarani Girl's High School. The school at Kandirpar, contrary to most historical accounts of Faizun's work, was not originally an English High School, but a primary school which in 1908-9 must have been the "one middle vernacular school" of the region, referred to by J. Webster when he was compiling his East Bengal district gazetteers. In 1889 when Faizun received the title of Nawab, the school was converted to a Junior High School (Class VII). It got the status of high school approximately in 1931, long after the nawab's death. It functions today as Nawab Faizunnessa High School for girls.[20]

Faizun was aided in her efforts by Kalicharan De, a noted Brahmo of Comilla. Though renowned for her philanthropic works, her single greatest achievement was the founding of the girls' school at Kandir Par, several decades before another Muslim lady set up hers in Calcutta. It is doubtful whether any Muslim girl studied in the school till the early twentieth century most of the pupils being Brahmo or Hindu.

As the Women's Awakening spread in the Muslim Community, girls started attending school in greater number. Many girls who were later to become illustrious in public life were students of this school. For instance, Syeda Jahanara Haider (1917-1988) and Mehrunnessa Islam (b. 1921) both passed out from Faizunnessa Girls' School in 1933 and 1938 respectively. Jahanara, the daughter of Mr Ghani (a school inspector), was the first Muslim female graduate of Tipperah district, Mehrunnessa was the second. The latter's reminiscences of the school (she was admitted to class 3 in

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[20]Rowshan Ara Begum's unpublished M. Phil. thesis *Nawab Faizunnessa O Purbo Banger Muslim Samaj*, (Bengali), (Nawab Faizunnessa and Muslim society of East Bengal) (Rajshahi University, 1984), is perhaps the most accurate and detailed work on the Nawab to date.

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1929) provide a picture of the state of female education in Comilla at the time.[21] Meherunnessa and Jahanara were the first few Muslims at the school. Among *sharif* households of Comilla education outside the home was still highly disapproved of. At the time there were around 300 girls at the school - mostly Hindu and Brahmo. The Muslim girls could not go on foot to the school with the 'ayah', and had to go in a closed horse carriage and wear the *burqa*. The school fee for class III was Rs.2 and for class VI Rs.S a month (in those days a fine mill sari could be had for one Rupee).[22] Most of the teachers were Brahmo, Hindu or Christian. The school timing was 10am to 4pm. The curriculum was secular and comprehensive.

Attending school and subsequent results of Jahanara and Mehrennuessa created a stir in Comilla at the time. In this sense they were path blazers. Both went on to study at Eden College at Dhaka. Later, Jahanara completed her B.A. at Bethune College and Mehrennuessa at Victoria Institute in Calcutta. Those were the days of much greater interaction between the metropolis and other mofussil towns; many flocked to Calcutta for education and job opportunities. In later life, Jahanara became a renowned social worker and Mehrunnessa had a full-fledged career as an educationist.

ROKEYA'S MEMORABLE LEGACY IN CALCUTTA

The first woman to systematically and ceaselessly launch the campaign for Muslim women's education was Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein who set up a girls' school with meagre resources, in Calcutta, in 1911. Shortly before this, Khujasta Akter Bano also known as Suhrawardiya Begum (1878 - 1919), had established a girls' school in 1909 - The Khujasta Akter Bano Memorial

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[21] Interview Mrs. Mehrunnessa Islam March 3, 1991, Dhaka

[22] Mrs Islam remembers how her father was compelled to stop going to the local mosque for sending his daughter to school. He was accepted in a mosque in another locality.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Girls' School (which in 1938 was functioning as a non-government secondary school). Rokeya, however is acclaimed as one of Bengal's very first 'feminists', (along with Pandita Ramabai and Sarala Devi). Rokeya displayed a courage, vision and vigour that can only fill us with amazement today. She was a writer, a theoretician, an educationist and social worker who can be ranked without doubt among the great architects of the Bengal Awakening, Rammohun or Vidyasagar, in the matter of education. Though it would be constricting to restrict her to the dubious glory of the '*mahiyashi nari*' (great lady) who upheld Muslim women's education (as is the wont of historians), it was in this sphere that she left her abiding mark. Like other 'liberal' thinkers before and after her, she considered education the first pre-requisite for emancipation, as one essayist has commented: "She was the forerunner of our modern sensibility, our contemporary awareness, of our emancipated intellect, not just the pioneer of the women's movement alone... a finest bloom of the Awakening in the Bengal."[23] But unlike the Renaissance liberals, she ventured into zones which criticized and transcended liberal ideology.

Like Faizunnessa, Rokeya was born into a Zamindar family where it was unthinkable that girls would go to school. Rokeya herself recalled: "I never entered the precincts of a girl's school or college What little I have learnt was due to my older brother's love and care..."[24] Rokeya's father Zahiruddin Abu Saber disapproved of Rokeya's learning English or Bengali. But after nightfall she would take clandestine lessons by candlelight from her elder brother. Her elder sister Karimunnessa taught her the forbidden Bengali, and her husband Sakhawat gave lessons in English. Karimunnessa,

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[23]Abdul Mannan Syed, *Begum Rokeya*, (Bengali), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1983), foreword.

[24]Shamsunnahar Mahmud, *Rokeya Jibani*,(Bengali), (Life of Rokeya), (Calcutta: 1937, reprint. Dhaka: Bulbul Pub. House, 1987), p.39

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

to whom Rokeya dedicated *Motichur Vol II*, was herself a poet whose poetry never saw the light of day.

Turned out of house and home by her step daughter after her husband's death, Rokeya moved to Calcutta and set up the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School on March 11, 1911 at 13 Waliulla Lane in a small classroom, with eight girls. The medium of instruction was Urdu and Rokeya lamented that even fourteen years after the founding of the school she was unable to open a Bengali section. This more than anything reflects the Urdu ambience of *sharif* culture in Bengal, particularly Calcutta, at least the last vestiges of it. Anwara Bahar, who had later taught at Sakhawat Memorial herself, recalled: "The teachers in our school were all native Christian, Anglo Indian, Hindu or of non-Bengali Muslim origin. The only Bengali teacher was my aunt Begam Fatema Khanam."[25]

The 'Bengalicization' of the Calcutta *sharif* was to occur later, when following the new logic of things, they bowed out or acculturated to the changed social order. But Rokeya had read the writing on the wall. And she whose mother tongue was Urdu, saw to it that her other abiding legacy, i.e. her literary works, were executed in the language of the rising Muslim professional gentry, Bengali - the language forged into its modern shape by Vidyasagar, Bankim and Rabindranath.

The small school in Waliulla Lane made great advances despite social censure, and governmental nonchalance. By 1914 the number of students had increased to 39. A letter from the school secretary Maulvi Syed Ahmed Ali in *The Mussulman*, June 9, 1911, testifies that the enrollment from 'respectable' families was increasing. Every year Rokeya added a class till Sakhawat became a high school in 1931. When Fatema Khanam came to teach

[25]Anwara Bahar Chowdhury, cited in Mohammad Shamsul Alam, p.124

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

at Sakhawat in 1927 she was the only Bengali *bhadromohila* there. Fatema recorded her impressions:

> There is no comparison of the elderly widow (Rokeya) with anyone else with regard to her efforts for the useless women of the Muslim community. The Koran, English, Bengali, Urdu, Persian, nursing, cooking, sewing, etc., - all the essentials of a girl's education are imparted here but the Bengalis lag behind. Of 114 girls only 2 are Bengali.[26]

Rokeya went from door to door, entreating guardians to send their female wards to her school, guaranteeing security and purdah by offering a covered transport for the girls. Students recall a *phaeton-garhi* (horse drawn carriage) and a motor bus, both covered with curtains or shutters drawn, which took them to school and brought them back. Rokeya often mellowed her bold formulation of women's emancipation as laid down in her earlier works by incorporating popular religious sentiment when she made public addresses with regard to female education and her school. Thus in her presidential speech at the Bengal Women's Education Conference in 1926, she said:

> There are signs of awakening among our Hindu sisters who have made great advances but Muslim women are still engulfed in darkness... The opponents of female education say that women will become wanton and unruly. Fie ! They call themselves Muslims and yet go against the basic tenets of Islam which accords women an equal right to education.[27]

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[26]See Fatema's letter of March 8, 1927, to Abul Fazl, in M. Fatema Khanam, *Swaptarshi*, preface.

[27]Mrs R. S. Hossein, "Bangiyo Nari Shiksha Samiti Sabhapatir Adhibhashan", (Bengali), (Presidential Address Bengal Education Conference), *Saogat*, 5:10, Asharh, 1333. pp. 694-95.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Though orthodox quarters attacked Rokeya whenever they could,[28] she did not lack supporters. Men and women of the Brahmo, Hindu and Muslim Community congratulated and encouraged her. Sometimes they provided direct material and moral support. Liberal dailies and periodicals such as *The Mussulman, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Mohammadi* and *Saogat*, lauded her efforts.

Rokeya gave leadership to one branch of the renaissance. Pragmatism and secularism in place of spiritualism, a spirit of critical enquiry in place of unquestioning acceptance of tradition - these were the characteristic of her thought. In a recent study, its author describes the school in Calcutta as a link, however fragile, between the city based 'Bengal Renaissance' and the Muslim Community.[29] But her work in the Muslim Community itself, was unique. In that, first phase of the *'nari jagoron'*, Rokeya's school was the institution from which were to soon emerge many of the Muslim *bhadro-mohila*. Her school was both a symbol of women's agency and will, and a reality representing what the symbol stood for. "The generation Rokeya's school helped create later left their indelible mark on the women's awakening."[30]

Rokeya's work was carried on by Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908-1964) — writer, teacher, social worker and a parliamentarian. Born in an enlightened family of Noakhali, her father was descended from Munshi Tamijuddin and his son Fazlul Karim. The latter was among the first generation of Bengali Muslim graduates. Her maternal grandfather Maulana Abdul Aziz was one of

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[28]The present researcher's grandmother, who studied at Rokeya's school, recalled oblique insinuations of loose moral character about those who studied there, by orthodox members of society.

[29]Mohammad Shamsul Alam, p.113.

[30]Maleka Begum, *Banglar Nari Andolon* (Bengali), (The women's movement in Bengal), (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1989) p.79.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

the founding members of the Musulman Suhrid Sammeloni. Nonetheless, her childhood was spent in the strictest *purdah* in Chittagong. The difference was - times had changed, and Nahar's perseverance succeeded in getting her formal degrees. At nine she was taken out of Dr. Khastagirs girls school in Chittagong on grounds of purdah. Nahar reminisced:

> How great were the number of students in that vast institution - and of these only three or four Muslims!... Amiyamakha, revolutionary Kalpana Dutt's elder sister, Deshpriyo Jatindro Mohon's sister - daughters of many illustrious families studied there... I had gone upto class VI when...I was taken out of school...[31]

Nahar started her studies under a Hindu male tutor at home. A thick curtain separated them, to ensure *purdah.* Nahar passed the matriculation examination with flying colours, and braced herself for college. Kazi Nazrul Islam, rebel poet of Bengal, wrote her a stirring letter:

> I suspect that whoever your guardian may be, cannot be touched by the 20th century enlightenment. Perhaps that is why you have to plead and weep to go to college.[32]

Shamsunnahar did get admitted to Diocesan College in Calcutta. The figure of the *burqa*-clad housewife - student (she had been married in the meantime) was often a source of amusement for the relatively more cosmopolitan women of Calcutta in that classy institution. However, Shamsunnahar surprised everybody by securing the 20th place among the students who had appeared for the I.A. examination under Calcutta University in 1928. Shamsunnahar passed her B.A. with distinction in 1932

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[31]Shamsunnahar Mahmud, "Ami Jokhon Chhatri Chhilam', (Bengali), (When I was a student), in *Varshavani*, Calcutta, 1357 BS, cited by Shahida Parveen, *Begum Shamsunnahar.*

[32]Quoted in Shamsunnahar Mahmud, *Nazrulke Jemon Dekhechi*, (Bengali), (As I have seen Nazrul), (Calcutta: Nabajug Prakashani, 1959), p.80

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

and was accorded a civic reception by Rokeya's *Anjuman-i-Khawateen-i-Islam* in the same year. In her address, Rokeya hailed Nahar's passing the B.A. examination as an honour for women and prayed that more women would follow Nahar's footsteps.[33] By 1940 Lady Brabourne College had been founded in Calcutta and Shamsunnahar accepted the post of teacher in Bengali at the college. In 1942, while World War II was raging in Europe and Bengal itself was in the throes of the 'Quit India' Movement, Shamsunnahar, whose heart had been set on obtaining the degree, appeared for the Master's examination as a private candidate once more: "I was writing while the activists were engaged in confronting the police downstairs. Tremors went through the university building as they chanted their slogans."[34]

The condition of women of the Muslim middle class was portrayed by Nazrul in another letter to Shamsunnanahr:

> The women in our land have a lamentable fate so many... whither away before bloom under the care that society and home heap upon them. They are held prisoners by the needs of the home and hearth (*ghar*). The wall will not crumble unless women revolt.[35]

Shamsunnahar was one of Rokeya's earliest disciples and allies and helped her with her school and the *Anjuman*, in Calcutta.

THE DHAKA SCENE

Early Schools in Dhaka

While these momentous events were taking place in Calcutta and to a less

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[33]Cited by Anwara Bahar, *'Shamsunnahar Mahmud'*, (Bengali), Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1987, p.20.

[34]Shamsunnahar Mahmud, "Ami Jokhon Chhatri", cited in Shahida Parveen, *Begum Shamsunnahar*, p.26

[35]Kazi Nazrul Islam, cited in Anwara Bahar, *Shamsunnahar*, p.28.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

spectacular extent, in Comilla, Dhaka was experiencing its own upheavals in the field of female education. As in Calcutta missionaries were active in the matter of female education in Dhaka also. In 1824 there was a girls' school in Dhaka 'The Christian female school' run by Mrs. Charles Leonard. The school was closed down in 1826 after her sudden death. This and other schools in East Bengal were run by the Serampore Mission. The Narandiya School started with 30 girls. Muddarbari School in Chittagong had 50 girls and went up to the 3rd and 4th classes. The students were mostly under six. Another one at Muradpur had students who were 10 to 17 years old. There was a school at Bhaluadigi. Zenana classes were also held at many boy's schools and *pathshalas.*

In 1876 Dr. Annada Charan Khastagir, established a middle English Girls School in Chittagong. In 1907 his son-in-law transformed it into Dr. Khastagir Girl's High School, a noted institution in East Bengal, where many daughters of illustrious families came to study. Mymensingh had a rich history in female education from the 1860s onward; Alexander Duff Girls'School (probably later renamed Bidyamoyee) attracted large numbers of girls eager for education. Local zamindars were also very active in this culturally advanced area, and founded girls' schools on private initiative.

Normal Schools

Seeing that interest in female education was strong in Dhaka, Mr Martin, Inspector of schools for the south-east, asked the government to set up a female normal school in 1862. After some deliberation the Government of India sanctioned "the establishment, experimentally for one year of a Normal School at Dacca for the training of Native School Mistresses."[36]

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[36] Government of India to Government of Britain, 23 March 1863, *Bengal Education Consultations, XV,* 70, March 1863, 140, cited in Sharif Uddin Ahmed, pp.70, 88, n.79.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Consequently, on 11 May 1863, the first government Female Normal School was opened in Dhaka with 16 students most of them *Bairagi* by caste as high caste Hindu girls were still educated at home. Initially the school, located at Sutrapur, was a success; but in the end it "proved too far ahead of its time"[37] and had to close down in 1872 after producing 17 trained teachers.

Encouraged by the government's efforts local Brahmos led by notables such as Dinonath Sen, Abhay Dutt and Kaliprsanna opened their own female school the *Antahpur Stree Shiksha Sabha* in 1870. The government provided an annual grant of Rs. 150 for the *Sabha*.[38] This was the school Mary Carpenter had inspected on her trip to Dhaka. In 1876, she observed at a public address in London:

> I proceeded to Dhaka where I had reason to know that a great work was going on. Here an adult school has been established which was attended by a number of the wives of native gentlemen anxious to advance the cause of female education. No other school of the kind exists in India...[39]

Musulman Suhrid Sammilani

In 1883 a group of young, Dhaka progressives founded an association for the education of women within the *andarmahal* similar to the government aided projects of *zenana education* which became quite popular at the time.

The *Sammilani* which was in plain words a small voluntary association

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[37]Sharif Uddin Ahmed, p.71

[38]Adinath Sen, *Swargiyo Dinonath Sener Jiboni O Tatkalin Purbobongo*, vol 1, (Bengali), (The life of late Dinanath Sen and Contemporary East Bengal), (Calcutta: 1948), pp.145 -146

[39]*Dacca Gazette*, Monday August 14, 1876, Cited in Adinath Sen, pp. 145-146

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

epitomized the ambivalence of the situation with regard to female education among the middle class in the community. On the one hand, there were all the strictures of *purdah* which no self-respecting Muslim would care to violate; on the other, there was the example of the Brahmo community and the inviting prospect of being 'modern' with all its emphases on female emancipation and the raising of women's status. The *Sammilani* was one of the myriad responses being devised by the 'natives' in their colonial encounter. It was a compromise between a traditional *andarmahal* education and a 'modern' institutionalized one - an association which, along with its preceptors stood halfway between the old road and the new. In this lay the significance of this otherwise small, if unusual, association.

A group of students mostly from Dhaka College - Abdul Majid, Abdul Aziz, Fazlul Karim, Bazlur Rahim and Hemayetuddin - decided to found a small voluntary association with the grandiose aim (as was the wont of those inspired by reformist zeal in those days) of regenerating the moribund Muslim society. Though this was the original aim of the Sammilani, in its yearly report for 1883 it was stated: "...for the time being this association will devote itself to the spread and development of female education in the Muslim community."[40] The association drew up a syllabus corresponding to the one in the Calcutta University and distributed it in the *andarmahal* along with books. Private tutions were provided; girls studied in the privacy of their homes and took the examinations. Results (e.g 'promotions') were handed out. Abdul Aziz's wife Rabeya Khatun and Hemayetuddin's wife Hasina Khatun were promoted from the 4th to 5th class in this manner. A total of 37 students from Dhaka, Barisal, Mymensingh and Calcutta, took the examinations conducted by the Sammiloni in Urdu and

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[40]Cited by Muntasir Mamun, "Unish Satake Purbo Banger Sabha Samiti", (Bengali), (Associations and meetings in nineteenth century East Bengal), *Dhaka Viswabidyalay Patrika*, December 1983, p.101.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Bengali. Thirty-three candidates passed. The organization functioned well till 1887 and ceased to exist in 1905.

Eden Girls' School and College

As mentioned above, Dhaka had been experiencing its own course of modernization and reform. The founding of the first formal school Eden Female school, named after the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Ashley Eden, was a milestone in women's educational history in this period. School records do not exist and the school itself was later merged with Kamrunnessa in the first half of the twentieth century. For the origins of the school, one has to go back to the times when the local residents of Dhaka, specially the Brahmos, were making their experiments in female education. One of the first endeavours was the *Antahpur Shiksha Sabha* or Zenana Education Society. Under the auspices of *Shubha Sadhini Sabha* (philanthropic society), a Female Adult School was founded in 1873, which was attended mainly, though not exclusively, by Brahmo girls. This was the school Mary Carpenter had inspected. Encouraged by Miss Carpenter's report, the government of Bengal asked the Philanthropic Society if another girls' school could be set up in Dhaka. In response the Dhaka Brahmos, led by Nabakanta and Brajasundar Mitra, proposed to convert their Female Adult School into a girls' school which was formally opened in June 1878. Within months the founders decided to hand over the management to the government under the new name of 'Eden Female School' as appreciation for the Lieutenant Governor, Ashley Eden's interest in the matter of female education in Dhaka. "The committee's proposals were accepted and so in September 1878, the now famous Government controlled Eden Girls' School came into existence."[41] Another

[41]Bengal Education Consultations, 1154, September 1878, 135-36; also *Dhaka Prakash*, 17 Bhadra 1285/Sept. 1 1878; cited in Sharif Uddin Ahmed, *Dacca: A Study in Urban History and Development*, (London: Curzon Press, 11986), p.72 (footnote n.86).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

source, also cites 1878 as the year in which "Ashley Eden established a Middle Vernacular school for girls in Dhaka".[42]

The school was founded in Lakshmibazar (in old Dhaka). The *Bamabodhini Patrika* of March 1880 (no. 182) continued a discussion on female education and stated that out of 153 students at Eden in 1880, only one was Muslim. In 1911 the number of Muslim girls rose to 25; there were 209 Hindus and 8 Christians, 1 Parsee, 1 Eurasian. In 1896-97, Eden Female School was a Vernacular school, one of the six High Schools for girls in Bengal. Of these only Bethune School in Calcutta and Eden School in Dhaka were maintained by the Department of Education.[43] This was the first government secondary school for girls in the region and was to remain so for a long time. The education report of 1896-97 stated that Eden had 130 girls and "passed one at the matriculation".[44] At the time the Sixth Quinquennial Review (1907-1912) was being compiled, Bengal had 24 English secondary schools for girls. It was reported that the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam "possesses a very excellent high school at Dhaka with training classes and a boarding house"[45], meaning Eden School.

Akhtar Imam (b. 1917), an eminent student of Eden Girl's School and College, gives a vivid picture of the school in her memoir *'Eden Theke*

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[42]Hashmat Ara, "Itihasher Bandhur Path Periye Dipali Holo Kamrunnessa", *Dainik Desh*, June 21, 1989. The founding of the school in 1878 is also mentioned by S.M. Ali in "Education and Culture in Dhaka during the Last Hundred Years" in *Muhammad Shahidullah Felicitation Volume*, Enamul Huq (ed), (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1966).

[43]*Progress of Education in India 1892-93 - 1896-97, Third Quinquennial Review*, (London: Darling and Sons, 1898), p.304.

[44]ibid., p.304.

[45]*Progress of Education in India, 1907 - 1912*, Sixth Quinquennial Review, Vol I, by H. Sharp C.I.E., (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1913), p.217.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Bethune'. She traces the story of Eden from the 1920's to the close of the 1940's when it was located at Suddurghat in 'Old Dhaka'. According to government reports the school was 'miserably housed' and the teaching 'below the proper mark'; but the townspeople certainly looked up to it. Mrs Imam reminisces:

> The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were read as texts from the very lower classes. We would enjoy the stories of Ram and Ravana, Sita's exile, the battle of Kurukshetra... In writing of those days in Eden, lost forever, the names of so many former Muslim students come to my mind...[46]

Mrs Imam provides a sizable list (but no dates) of women who studied at Eden in the early part of this century and became eminent personalities later on and contributed to the women's educational movement in Bengal. Altafunnessa, Mrs Imam's older sister, did her B.A. from Bethune and worked variously as School Inspectress, Headmistress of Calcutta Female Training School, etc. Mrs Jahanara Haider passed Matriculation examination with distinction from Comilla Faizunnessa Girls' High School in 1933 and came to study at Eden college. Jahanara, who like many other Muslim women at that time observed strict purdah and never forsook the *burqa*, studied English at Bethune (Mrs Imam refers to herself and Jahanara as the first two Muslim women graduates with Honours). Rabeya Khatun came from Rajshahi to study at Eden and later went on to Bethune. She worked as headmistress at several schools and was the first principal of the Female Training College at Mymensingh. Khodeja Khatun of Bogra made her career as an educationist, retiring as principal of Eden College. Maleka Akhtar Bano, who studied with Mrs Imam in school, was one of the pioneers among women studying Science. Later she obtained a PhD from U.K. and

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[46]Akhtar Imam, *Eden theke Bethune*, (Bengali), (From Eden to Bethune), (Dhaka: the author, 1990) p.17

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

worked as professor of Chemistry at Eden Girls' College for many years. The list is long and includes the names of Afsarunnessa, Sitara Begum, Jamshedunnessa, Lutfunnessa Zoha, Zobaida Khatun, Lulu Bilquis Bano, Nur Jahan Begum, Laila Arjamand Bano - all who studied at Eden and later built up careers as writers, educationists, editors or artists. About the role of Eden Girls' school and college, Akhtar Imam commented:

> It would not be wrong to say that many of Bengal's unfavoured female population, who have subsequently crossed the barriers of superstition and ignorance - have dared to tread the path blazed by the women whose names I have mentioned.[47]

Mrs Imam looks up to Fazilatunnessa Zoha (1905-76), first Muslim woman in the region to obtain a Master's in Mathematics, as a model for women of the time. She passed her matriculation examination from Eden School with flying colours in 1921. After completing her Bachelor's from Bethune College in Calcutta, she came to study Mathematics at Dhaka University (founded in 1921). Nazrul Islam himself wrote a poem in her honour. Nasiruddin, the editor of *Saogat* arranged a reception for Fazilatunnessa in Calcutta, after her M.A. result, disregarding the opposition put up by the orthodox quarters which did not want a woman to be accorded a "public" reception. The event described by Nasiruddin illustrated the incompatibility between the progressive-liberal and the conservative- orthodox groups that had developed. Fazilatunnessa also chose education as a career. She was the head of the Department of Mathematics at Bethune College in Calcutta, and later its Vice-Principal. "It was a rare honour for a Muslim woman to become Vice-Principal in a premier educational institution in those days."[48] In 1947 her family opted for Pakistan and Fazilatunnessa came to Dhaka and

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[47]Akhtar Imam, ibid, p.23

[48]Akhtar Imam, ibid, p.37

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

took over the charge of Eden College as its principal.

Daulatunnessa Khatun (b.1918) had a somewhat different career from all the women mentioned here. Married at a very early age, she went to Eden Girls' School till 1930 at which point she had join her husband's family in Gaibandha. Daulatunnessa, however, pursued her studies in private and ultimately obtained the B.A. degree. But her abiding contribution was the example she set by joining in the nationalist struggle against the British, one of the few Muslim women who were able to do so. Daulatunnessa organized women's *samitis* (associations) in Gaibandha which carried on the work of Gandhi and his "civil disobedience" movement, in remote villages of Bengal. She was only fourteen at the time, but she had decided that it was her task to work among the women of rural Bengal. People gathered from far and wide to hear her speak. At this juncture the women's movement had been co-opted by the nationalist struggle and however faint the light Daulatunnessa carried the torch of the political struggle into the Muslim andarmahal. She also wrote novels and short stories.

Lila Nag and Fazilatunnessa paved the way for women entrants to Dhaka University. Another milestone was the appointment of Koru Kona Gupta as a teacher in the Department of History in 1935. She became the first woman to receive an appointment at Dhaka University. These events opened a new chapter in the history of women's education in the region and larger number of girls stepped out of the *andar* to pursue studies. By the close of the 1930's middle class Muslim families were sending their female wards to educational institutions.

The Abiding Contribution of Dipali Sangha

The story of Dhaka's educational history will not be complete without a summary of Lila Nag's activities through the Dipali Sangha. All said and

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

done, Eden was an 'elite' institution with governmental patronage and British principals (Mrs Alfonso, Mrs Wills). By the second decade of the twentieth Century, political events in India had given birth to an anti-British, nationalist movement as well as a more clandestine 'terrorist' movement aimed at the overthrow of the Raj. As expected the Hindu/Brahmo section of Bengal took the lead in these movements while the majority of Muslims, lagging behind in the race for education and government jobs, kept a cautious distance, occasionally joining in. However, the point to be considered here is that the nationalist struggle had co-opted the women's movement in Bengal, and the struggle had created a new set of attitudes and goals which looked for more nationalistic modes of education.

In 1905 the Swadeshi movement was launched to protest against the partition of Bengal. Secret revolutionary societies were also formed. By the 1920's activities of the radical wing of the movement were in full swing. In Dhaka, members of revolutionary societies such as *Anushilan* and *Jugantar Samiti*, began to contemplate the state of female education. There was practically no school for girls during the period, save Eden which they felt adhered to British ideals and interests. "Nationalist Hindu/Brahmo and middle class families did not get much chance to send their girls to these schools and were also not inclined to."[49]

Under these circumstances, Lila Nag, founder of Dipali Sangha, with the help of her co-activists, established four girl's school in Dhaka between the years 1920-28:

- Dipali 1, soon to become Kamrunnessa Girls' School
- Dipali 2, present day Bangla Bazar Girls' School
- Nari Shiksha Mandir, present day Sher-e-Bangla School

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[49]Hashmat Ara, "Itihaser".

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

- Purana Paltan Girl's School

Dipali School-1 was founded sometime around 1924. Lila Nag realized the urgent need for a Muslim Girls' school and started working behind the scenes to help transform it into Kamrunnessa.

The story goes that Khwaja Ahsanullah, Nawab of Dhaka, had four wives, one of whom was named Kamrunnessa.[50] (She was said to be of foreign origin, her father a jockey at the Ramna Race Course in Dhaka). Kamrunnessa gave birth to three daughters, Meher Bano, Peri Bano, and Aktar Bano. Aktar a spirited woman divorced her debauched husband to lead a life of independence looking after her estates. Her trusted helping hand and advisor was a Hindu lawyer probably called Jogesh Chandra who was injured in an accident and succumbed to his injuries. Saddened by the death of her trusted friend, Aktar Bano donated the land where her office was situated to the Ram Krishna Mission for a temple. More significant from the point of view of female education she also donated a piece of land for Dipali Sangha's schools, stipulating that one of these be renamed after her mother Kamrunnessa. Thus Kamrunnessa Girl's school came into being in 1924, 50 odd years after Faizunnessa founded her school in Comilla and 13 years after Rokeya established hers. By now girls from respectable Muslim families were beginning to attend school in larger numbers. Faizunnessa and Sakhawat had loosened the hard attitudes to an appreciable extent.

From 1926 to 1942 Mrs Sujata Ray (wife of Dr. S.N. Ray, professor of English at Dhaka University) steered the fortunes of Kamrunnessa through the non-cooperation movement and closure of Government funds. In 1947 it was declared a Government school with Mrs. Wills in charge as headmistress. In 1949, Anwara Bahar, who had taught at Sakhawat and Bidyamoyee

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[50] Hashmat Ara, "Itihaser..." and the present researcher's Interview with Mrs. Sarwar Khan, granddaughter of Peri Bano.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

in Mymensingh, was appointed Headmistress of Kamrunnessa school. Anwara was Fatema Khanam's niece and Habibullah Bahar's wife.

The course of the history of female emancipation thus sometimes contained surprises. Such was the action of Aktar Bano's refusing the conventional fate of the Begum with a debauched landed aristocrat for a husband, or donating land for a temple and a school, or administering her own estates. Such was the case also of her widowed sister Peri Bano who retreated to Calcutta, the epicentre of culture and modern education in Bengal. Far from the constricting traditions of the illustrious Nawab family, Peri Bano not only succeeded in educating her son, her daughter Zulekha Bano (1904 -1974) was also admitted to Diocesan School in Calcutta. Zulikha secured the Bachelor of Arts degree in Sanskrit from Calcutta University in 1927, with a first class. Zulikha may be reckoned among the first few Bengali Muslim female graduates, though the anomaly was that her children, true to the custom of the Nawab family, could not speak good Bengali. Zulikha's daughter reminisced: "Where we could not speak proper Bengali, our mother would often recite Sanskrit verses."[51] Zulikha married Ghulam Murshed, an officer in the Indian Civil Service, and entered a life of quiet domesticity. But somehow the family reverted to traditional practice (though Ghulam Murshed was not of the Nawab family) and Zulikha's daughter did not receive the same kind of formal, institutional education as her mother though she was given a very good education at home.

Nari Shiksha Mandir, established by Lila Nag in 1928 after the founding of Kamrunnessa and Banglabazar as part of the Dipali scheme, functions today as Sher-e-Bangla girl's School. The school was located in the aristocratic Rankin Street (Wari) of Dhaka and classes started with three young students under the shade of a tree. But it soon began to flourish and the

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[51] Interview with Mrs. Sarwar Khan, Dhaka, June 3, 1991.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

school had to be transferred to the huge building donated by Maharaj Kumud Chandra Singh of Shusong. 'Nari Shiksha' was soon transformed into a high school. From 1932-1948 its administration was in the able hands of Usharani. Lila Nag, who played a crucial role in the spread of female education in East Bengal, usually kept herself behind the scene, but it was at Nari Shiksha Mandir that she directly assumed the role of headmistress. Perhaps, for this reason, it was a school with a difference - closest to the concept of an Ashram. It had provisions for young Hindu widows.

In those decades there were a few other girls' schools in Dhaka and its vicinity - some run on local initiative, some partially aided by the government or municipal bodies. The Morgan Girls' School was founded in 1910 at Narayanganj by Mr Morgan, the then Chairman of the Narayanganj Municipality. He also secured a monthly grant of Rs.300 for the school and the patronage of the local commissioners. The school still functions today as 'The Morgan Girls' High School.

A lesser school was the Posta Girls school founded sometime in the early 1920s. It was about to be abandoned when with the encouragement of the then school inspectress Mrinalini Sen, M. Fatema Khan revived the moribund school next to her house at 88 Urdu Road in old Dhaka. Fatema worked there till 1926 and the school was said to have been in existence till 1947.

Fariduddin Siddiky, Zamindar of Boliadi (near Dhaka), founded a primary school for girls at Becharam Deuri in Dhaka in 1932. He had been inspired by Maula Baksh, Asst. Director for education in Bengal who had appealed to the leaders in Muslim society to take up the issue of female education. Abdul Khaleq, Abdul Latif, and Dr. Bulbul, took the initiative in improving what was then known as the Muslim Girls' School at Becharam Deuri (now the Anwara Begum Girls' High School). However, the contribution of a single lady called Ustad Amma in the success of this school was memo-

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

rable. 'Ustad Amma' (mother-Teacher) alias Sufia Khatun would travel long distances to collect little girls and set them down in a makeshift class. Like Rokeya she went from door to door soliciting scholars.[52] The school was founded in the year of Rokeya's death and functions to this day.[53]

A College for Muslim Girls

Even though as late as 1909 Khan Bahadur Abdul Jabbar, member of the Legislative Council, objected to the establishment of a school for Muslim girls,by the fourth decade of the century, attitudes had changed gradually and a secton of the community felt the need for higher female education. In 1936, for instance, of the 1095 girls attending the various colleges in Calcutta, 867 were Hindu and 37 were Muslim.[54]

Shaista Ikramullah who had described her mother's traditional education wrote about her own: "In 1927 my going to an English school was looked upon with much disfavour and yet by 1947 every girl of good family was going to school. What my father had said had come to pass."[55] What her father (a government servant himself) had foreseen was that by the 1940s Muslim women of Calcutta would be participating in the process of modernization as the Brahmo and Hindu women had done several decades before.

In 1939 the Bengal Government, then under the ministry of Fazlul Huq, founded The Lady Brabourne College for girls in response to the clamour of the Muslim community. Sir John Woodhead laid the foundation stone on

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[52]This Ustad Amma was probably the same person mentioned by interviewees describing the Dhaka scene in the 20s and 30s.

[53]Hashmat Ara, *Dainik Desh*, June 24, 1990

[54]J. S. Salik, "Muslim Girls' College - The Purdah Years", in Maya Dutt (ed), *Lady Brabourne College Patrika/Lady Brabourne College Golden Jubilee Volume*, (Bengali/English), (Calcutta: Maya Dutt, 1989), p.23.

[55]Ikramullah, p.34.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

August 26, 1939 - on a spacious plot in Park Circus where the college moved in 1941 from a rented premise. The college named after the wife of the late governor of Bengal, was initially meant for Muslim girls but soon opened its doors to non-Muslim girls. The hostel, however, was reserved for the former. The monthly fee was Rs.4. There were two-year scholarships of Rs.10 for Muslim girls. After 1947, the hostel opened its doors for all creeds.[56]

Classes for Intermediate Arts started on July 25, 1939, with 35 Muslim girls; but soon pupils of other communities were admitted due to lack of sufficient enrollment. Just prior to Independence in 1947, there were 152 pupils of whom 120 were Muslims. Miss F.E. Grose was appointed principal. Members of its governing body included Begum Hamida Momen MLC, Mrs Fara Bano Khanum MLA, Mrs Hasina Murshed MBA MLA, and Miss S.B Gupta. The foundation staff consisted of nine teachers among whom were: Miss Stella Bose (English); Rama Choudhury (Philosophy); Snigdhaprova Mitra (Mathematics); Shamsunnahar Mahmud (Bengali); and Fatema Begum (Urdu).

MILESTONES

The British Government's policy toward female education was proclaimed for the first time in Wood's Education Despatch of 1854. Despite Dalhousie's inclination toward female education and the Despatch which made various recommendations and pledged governmental support, the uprising of 1857 acted as a setback. However, on the basis of the Despatch, J. Halliday, Governor of Bengal, promised to aid Vidyasagar in his scheme for setting up girls' schools. Unfortunately, due to the government's failure to sanction funds, Halliday could not live up to his commitment. The subsequent

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[56]See Maya Dutt (ed), *Lady Brabourne College Patrika*, for a history of the college.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Stanley Despatch of 1859 did not help matters much either.[57]

However, the establishment of municipal boards was an impetus to female education as it enabled these bodies to promote schemes for girls' schools, etc., in conjunction with local residents. The *Bamabodhini Patrika* in its August (1873) issue published an article on female education based on the Report on the Progress of Education in Bengal 1871-72. There were at the time 110 government aided and 14 non-aided girls' schools in Calcutta. A total of 732 students, of which 58 were Muslim, attended these schools,. The Patrika published another article on female education in March 1880 which stated that of the 153 students at Eden School in Dhaka, only one was Muslim.

In 1882 an Education Commission was constituted under the chairmanship of W.W. Hunter, to review the situation. The commission made some significant recommendations regarding female education: Municipal and other local authorities were asked to deploy funds for girls'schools as they saw fit. The government was also asked to consider the economic and social constraints of the local populace in sending their female wards to school, and to adapt and adjust its education grants policy accordingly. Scholarships of various categories were recommended so that guardians would not feel the economic burden of sending girls to school. The text and Syllabi needed to be revised and readjusted to real needs. Some residential facilities and increased supply of female teachers were also to be considered. Zenana education whereby *purdah-nasin* girls could be imparted a secular type of education within the *andarmahal/antahpur* by qualified teachers,

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[57]See Sharifa Khatun, "Adhunik Shiksha O Unish Shotoker Banglar Nari Samaj", (Bengali), (Modern education and female education in the nineteenth century), in Mohammed Moniruzzaman (ed), *Muhammed Enamul Huq Smarok Grantha*, (Bengali), (Muhammad Enamul Huq Memorial Volume), (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1985).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

should be encouraged.[58] Zenana agencies set up by local residents (or missionaries) were to be aided if possible. The commission also recommended the appointment of school inspectresses in a greater number. The government of Bengal tried to implement the recommendations of the Hunter Commission as best it could. "On the whole one may say, some of the provisions were implemented, while others were not."[59]

In 1881-82, there were 1015 girls' schools in Bengal, attended by a total of 81,349 female students. Government assistance for schools came in various forms. Some schools were maintained by the Department of Education, or by District or Municipal Boards; some specially those run by missions received grants-in-aid, and others were unofficially patronized by local government officials.

In 1886-87 the rate of attendance at schools in Bengal was 25.85 per cent of the total population of boys of school-going age. The rate for girls was a mere 0.91 per cent. In 1899-1900, these rates increased to 28.9 and 1.9 respectively - rather a modest improvement in 12 years. In the period 1892-97 there were three Arts Colleges for girls in Bengal - Bethune, Loreto House and La Martiniere - all at Calcutta, with a total enrolment of 33 students.[60] Only two of the six high schools for girls in Bengal were directly maintained by the Department of Education - viz 'The Bethune Collegiate School' in Calcutta and 'The Eden Female School' in Dhaka.

Reasons for the backwardness of females in education were manifold.

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[58]Under 'Zenana education' system, usually elderly women, missionary or otherwise, went into the *antahpur* to teach women arithmetic, geography, sewing, health science, etc., and prepared them to take the school examinations at various levels, as 'private candidates'.

[59]Sharifa Khatun, "Adhunik Shiksha...", p.297.

[60]*Progress of Education in India, 1892-93 to 1896-97, Third Quinquennial Review*, p.303.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

There was no economic incentive to educate girls of the middle class because they were never expected to enter wage work and earn their living. In fact it was thought they would be more productive at home. Ideological barriers were as strong. Once educated women might not be disposed to fulfil their role within the home. It might also compromise purdah and jeopardize chastity. Child marriage and lack of female teachers were other constraints The government's uneven and cautious policies also comprised a major factor in negligence though simultaneously it was government initiative that had promoted female education in many areas. Grants and scholarships were provided to girl's schools, co-education at the primary level as recommended by the Report, met with some success. Advances were not made in the matter of female teachers, however. Though earlier reports had indicated seclusion and early marriage as chief deterrents to female education, J. S. Cotton in the Third Quinquennial Review emphasized the other factors cited above: (The report meant the upper primary level)

> The absence of an adequate supply of female teachers, and the social objection to the employment of women in remunerative work, seem to be more potent obstacles in the advancement of female education than the system of early marriage or the seclusion of females from public gaze...[61]

The Report on Public Instruction for 1881-82 had illustrated that few Muslim girls reached the middle stage, and that still held true for several decades to come.

The census of India 1901 provides ample information on the state of education in the province. It revealed that the rate of Muslim women's education had risen to 3% from the previous 1% and that 400 girls of the community had learnt English in the home. That this created a stir is evident from the reaction of the journal *Mihir O Sudhakar* which commented:

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[61] ibid., p.303.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> We never dreamt that the 1901 Census would proclaim the fact that 400 Muslim females within the antahpur have learnt English. Is it not our duty now to encourage female education?[62]

Education for girls started gaining popularity after 1905, an important factor behind this being increased governmental expenditure.[63] In 1905 there were 125 girls at Eden School (121 Hindu and Muslim) and 100 at Alexander School (Vidyamoyee Girls' School) in Mymensingh (the other high school for girls in Eastern Bengal being Dr. Khastagir's school in Chittagong). There were three middle English schools in the province which increased to five in 1911 (one being Faizunnessa's school in Comilla).[64] Muslim girls were visible in considerable number at the primary level, but the trend was to drop out shortly after. "Generally Muslim women did not pursue secondary or higher education due to social and economic reasons. Thus till 1910 no Muslim woman had acquired the Bachelor's degree from Calcutta University."[65] The situation changed to an extent after creation of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Though in 1911 the number of pupils at Eden increased to 238 (of which 209 were Hindu and

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[62] "Musulman Stree Samaje Ingraji Shiksha", (Bengali), (English education among Muslim girls), *Mihir O' Sudhakar*, Magh 1309BS /1902 A.D. cited in Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samoyik*, p.22

[63] See Shila Bose, "Rajnaitik Potobhumikay Banglar Muslim Nari Shikshar Bikash", (Bengali), (Development of Muslim Female Education in Bengal in the Political Context), in *Aitihasik*, No. 2, April 1988, and M. K. U. Molla, "Women's Education in Early Twentieth Century Eastern Bengal" in *Bengal Studies*, (East Lansing: University of Michigan, 1985).

[64] *The Report on the Progress of Education*, Eastern Bengal and Assam 1907 - 1911/1912, Vol. 1, p.95, cited by M.K.U. Molla, "The New Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam" in the *Journal of the Institute of Bangladesh Studies*, Rajshahi, 1981.

[65] Shila Bose, "Rajnaitik". p.65. A girl is mentioned on the University calendar but Ms. Bose does not provide the name. The datum is derived from the Report on Public Instruction in Bengal 1911-12.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

25 Muslim) change was generally slow,. The rate of Muslim girl's attendance at schools had increased from about 3 per cent in 1906 to just over 10 per cent in 1911.

The new provincial government with its capital at Dhaka wanted to do all it could to promote female education. Consequently a representative body under Mr R. Nathan, C.I.E., was constituted to advise the government. 'The Female Education Committee', as it was called, included such notables as Nawab Salimullah, Rai Dulal Chandra Dev, Nawab Ali Chowdhury, Mrs. P. Chatterjee, Mrs. E. Moore, Sister Frances, etc. The Committee drew up syllabi, inspected schools, implemented the 'Zenana' system of teaching within the home for women desirous of a more secular education, and made several other recommendations, which prompted the government to create more primary schools for girls all over Eastern Bengal and upgraded conditions in secondary schools. But most significantly, "the government took over management of the Eden Female School at Dhaka, Alexander Girl's school at Mymensingh and Dr. Khastagir Girl's School at Chittagong."[66] Eden School at Dhaka, described in 1906 by the Lt. Governor of the new province as "miserably housed... the teaching appears to fall below the proper mark", also "improved out of all knowledge" within a year.[67]

The government sanctioned money for teacher's training, and in 1906 classes were opened for the training of female teachers at Eden for the first time. In 1905 there were three middle English schools for girls in Eastern Bengal none managed by the Government In 1911 the number increased to five, and two came under government management (one of them was Faizunnessa's school) and the rest received some form of aid.

Despite these advances, social critic I. H. Shirazi was heard lamenting

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[66]M.K.U. Molla, "Women's education, " p.43

[67]Cited by M.K.V. Molla, ibid, p.42-43.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

in his essay, 'Stree Jatir Swadhinata' published in *Al-Eslam* (1916), that not a single Muslim girl had matriculated in Bengal. However, the editor added a footnote stating that the daughter of Mr. M.A. Rasul, the famous barrister in Calcutta, had passed matriculation examination that year and was planning to do her I.A.

The Calcutta University Calendar of 1911 contained a list of women who had pursued higher education from 1883-1910. All the women who received their Bachelor's (44) or Master's (7), or degrees in Medicine (4) were either Brahmo or Christian. In the field of higher education, it was not before the 1920s that the first Bengali Muslim women received their Bachelor and Master degrees. It will be remembered that as early as 1883, Kadambini and Chandramukhi had received theirs.[68]

In 1938 there were 36 (non-government) primary schools for Muslim girls in the Presidency and Burdwan divisions including Calcutta which received some aid. Besides the Suhrawardy Memorial Girls' School, there was only one other (non-government) secondary school for Muslim girls - the M. A. O. Girls' School in Calcutta. Four non-government Muslim girls' schools, including the Shamsia Zenana Madrasa established in 1897/8, had been permitted to open middle school classes.[69]

In 1921 alone, 45 women (all non-Muslim) graduated from Calcutta University. The following year Sultana Begum Muayyidzada received the B.A. degree (Honours) from Calcutta University, thereby becoming the first female graduate of Muslim Bengal. Sultana Begum Muayyidzada (born ≈1903) was the eldest daughter of Aga Muayyidul Islam, editor of the bilingual (Urdu and English) paper *Hablul Matin* published from Calcutta (Aga had

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[68]See Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role*, specially Chapter III, Expanding Horizons: Education of the *Bhadromohila*.

[69]S. J. Salik, p. 23.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

migrated to Calcutta from Persia and was called the 'Father of the Persian Renaissance'). Sultana appeared for her Senior Cambridge at the age of 14 and her Bachelor's at the age of 18. She received the 'Shantimoni' and 'Umeshchandra Mukherjee' Gold Medals for her academic proficiency.[70]

Sultana got admitted in the Master in Law class at Calcutta University in 1922 and sat for the First Law examination in the same year. Special arrangements had to be made for her as she was in purdah. Sultana probably did not complete the course (as her sister Sakina Faruk Muayyidzada was to do shortly after). She got married to barrister Mir Amiruddin in 1923 and moved to Madras. From the list of students who secured the first place in the B.A. examinations from 1890-1947 and became recipients of the 'Padmabati Medal' donated by Sir Rashbihari Gosh in 1884, we learn that Syeda Gauhar and Sultana Muayyidzada received this honour for their B.A. result in 1923.[71]

The lady who passed from Diocesan in 1923 with Syeda Gauhar must have been Begum Sakina Faruk Sultana Muayyidzada,[72] second daughter of Aga Muayyidul Islam. Sakina was born in Calcutta, and had tutors at home for Persian, English and French. She passed her matriculation as a private candidate, but her keenness of mind convinced her family to admit her to Diocesan College for girls. Sakina Muayyidzada passed her I.A., and

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[70] In all probability she appeared as a 'private' candidate, i.e. an examinee who studied the official university syllabus privately at home.

[71] Tapati Basu gives these dates in "Bangali Meyeder Lekhaporha", (Bengali) (Educational activities of Bengali girls), *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Sharadiya issue, 1991, p.248. No other information about the persons was provided by this source or by the university calendars.

[72] This conlusion was reached after some interpolation and deductive research carried out in order to locate the identity of the lady who passed in 1923. The main basis of our finding was the dates given by Tapati Basu and the fact that all of Aga Muayyidul Islam's five brilliant daughters had Begum and Sultan(a) attached to their names.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

her B.A. with Honours in first class. She studied privately for her M.A. in Law in the early 1920s and topped the list in Bengal, winning a gold medal. "She is the first Muslim lady in Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Orissa to pass the M.A. examination, and the first to obtain a degree in Law."[73] In 1935 she was the only woman to practice law (as an advocate) at the Calcutta High Court. Sakina knew Persian, Urdu, Bengali, English and French, and also Music and Painting. She was married to an ICS officer Mr. Majid. But for various reasons of incompatibility she left him and returned to Calcutta where she set up a career and played a courageous role in the anti-British movement by organizing protests and strikes among the under-privileged Dhangar (Sweeper) community.[74]

In the mean time, the University of Dhaka was established in 1921, which was the first of its kind in the province of Eastern Bengal. Lila Nag, after doing her bachelor's at Bethune College in Calcutta, was the first woman to do her Master's from Dhaka University in 1923. Fazilatunnessa created history by seeking admission to the M.A. course in Mathematics as the first Muslim female student of Dhaka University and securing the first class first position in the examination. In Eastern Bengal it is Fazilatunnessa's name, rather than the names of the brilliant Muayyidzada sisters mentioned before, that became a household word among the middle class. The reason for this was probably the fact that, though the Muayyidzada sisters lived in Calcutta, their culture was Persianized rather than indigenous (it is doubtful whether Bengali was at all cultivated in their home). On the other hand, Fazilatunnessa whose father worked in a very ordinary

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[73] S. M. H. Zaidi, *Position of Women under Islam*, (Calcutta: Book Tower, 1935), p.126, Appendix A.

[74] See Manju Chattopadhay, "Bangla Desher Prothom Juger (1920-40) Shromik Andolone Mohila Netritwa" in Ratnaboli Chatttopadhay and Gautam Niyogi (eds) *Bharat Itihase Nari*, (Bengali), (Women in Indian history), (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1989).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

post at Tangail (in Mymensingh) was a Bengali by culture and conviction, and rose to position and fame by dint of her own industry and merit.

Formal Education and Making of the Bhadromohila

As employment was not the objective of education, women seldom pursued scientific disciplines. Most preferred a liberal arts education. A handful of women got admitted in the Bachelor of Science Courses at Calcutta University in the early part of this century, but Muslim girls had not advanced as far as this. However, outside humanities, medicine was the first field where women stepped in. Apart from teaching, medicine was deemed the prestigious and proper profession for women by *Bhadro* society. But, initially entry into this profession was difficult. In 1883 the government had passed a resolution admitting women to Calcutta Medical College after Durga Mohan Das' daughter was refused entry in 1882 and had to go to Madras to pursue medicine. Kadambini Bose (Ganguly) was the first to enroll at the college in 1883-84 and also the first Bengali woman to become a doctor after completing her L.M.S. examination in 1886. She was appointed as a doctor at the Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital in 1888. Soon the Campbell Medical School also allowed women students from 1887.[75] A lady called Latifunnessa passed the Campbell Medical School examination with distinction, but she probably never used her skills.

By 1907 it was estimated that, of the 425 medical students at the Calcutta Medical College, seventeen were women (none of them Muslim). Lady Dufferin, wife of the Governor General Lord Dufferin, was an ardent promoter of women's medical study. She created a fund (the Dufferin Fund) providing scholarships for women who wanted to pursue the discipline.

Gradually, the horizon of professions was widening for Brahmo women as

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[75] For more details, see Borthwick, pp.322-324.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

the objective of education was widened. Initially, it included certain 'respectable' professions only, such as teaching or medicine. One of the first *bhadromohila* to take up teaching was Bamasundari Debi from Pabna who set up a school to train female teachers. Radhamani Devi, a widow and student of the Female Normal School in Dhaka, was also one of the very first women from the *bhadrolok* class to enter the professions when she accepted a teaching post at the *Sherpur Stree Shiksha Bidhayini Sabha* in 1866. Manorama Majumdar started teaching in Barisal in the same decade and in 1878 was appointed "second mistress of the Dacca Government Adult Female School on a salary of sixty rupees per month."[76] Muslim women did not take advantage of these facilities till the 1930s.

According to an UNESCO study of women's education in the twentieth century, "the period 1922-32 has been noted as the most inspiring period in the annals of Indian education."[77] The study observed that a major reason which prompted parents to educate daughters was that an educated girl had better prospects in the marriage market. A very few educated their daughters for sake of employment as teachers and the like. The social prejudices which had hindered progress, however, began to disappear gradually during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. As the report of the Quinquennial Review put it:

> Child marriage which was another obstacle in the way of girls' education has been made illegal by the Sarda Act, and there has been some relaxation of purdah... but the major issue remains and that is the provision of the funds that are required.[78]

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[76]Borthwick, p.316. See also pp. 310-336 for employment among the early Hindu/Brahmo *bhadromohila*.

[77]UNESCO Women and Education, (Paris: UNESCO, 1953) p.117.

[78]*Progress of Education in India 1932-1937: Eleventh Quinquennial Review* by John Sargent (Delhi: Bureau of Education, 1940) p.143.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

If the report was a true reflection of reality then one must conclude that this was a long way from a similar review made long ago in 1886-87 where officials of the raj were heard observing that parents did not wish to send their girls to school as it was feared this might make them *dushta* and contravene *purdah*. However one of the grounds for imparting education i.e. better prospects in the marriage market, still obtained (see above).

The entire situation with regard to education was reviewed by a *bhadromohila* who was an educationist and a writer and had herself lived through the times we have discussed here. Shamsunnahar wrote "Muslim Banga Stree Shiksha" for Masik Mohammadi in 1940, and basing her analysis on past reports and censuses, she discussed prevalent obstacles and goals achieved. She reviewed the situation from 1881 onwards:

> In 1901-2 of the 57,726 girls at school in Bengal only 6,322 were Muslim (10.9 per cent). In 1881-82 the total number of girls at the 'middle' level had been 1051; and of them 10 were Muslim. In 1931-32, number of girls at English High schools was 3,855 and 95 were Muslim (2.4 per cent). In 1931-32, 394 girls (Hindu and Muslim) passed matriculation; in 1936-37 the figure tripled to 1049.[79]

However limited, educational programmes of the reform movement initiated by the government and the community achieved two major ends:

a) ideologically they armed women subtly giving them the ability to define and create meaning.

b) they actually equipped them for professional service and wage work which required training and specialization thus paving the way for economic independence.

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[79]Prof. Shamsunnahar Mahmud, "Muslim Bange Stree Shiksha", (Bengali),(Female Education in Muslim Bengal), *Masik Mohammadi*, 14:1,45, Kartik 1347 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

For the Muslim *bhadromohila* the journey toward institutional education had been long and arduous. In the early part of the nineteenth century they had been surprisingly visible in the schools for little girls set up by missionaries in Calcutta and Dhaka with the help of local residents who were often women. There was a lull in the middle decades of the century. Towards the end of the century efforts were stepped up again and experiments were carried out both within the home and outside. But Muslim girls did not attend the school Faizunnessa had set up in 1873 till the early twentieth century. The outstanding achievement remained the founding of the Eden Female School in 1878.

Whether one refers to Sakhawat in Calcutta or Dhaka's Kamrunnessa and Eden, or Faizunnessa's School in Comilla, female education in the Muslim community started to make real headway from 1912 onwards as testified in government reports as well as contemporary memoirs. The creation of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam had borne one positive result for Muslims viz advances in the field of education. Women too were the beneficiaries and the Education Review of 1907-1912 remarked that "the most remarkable feature among the increases "had been that of Muhammedan girls".

The *bhadromohila* was coming into her own. The obstacles still held but they were not the same as in the days of Rokeya. Differential purdah observances in different families meant that many girls were still in severe purdah, but imperceptibly society was accepting the fact that women would go outside the home for education. They would break barriers of purdah, attend school and colleges as well, they would take part in processions, go to jail, 'work' in refugee Camps (i.e. in humanitarian projects) and sit in legislatures. A few would make it as teachers, lawyers and doctors, or educationists and writers (respectable professions all). They would demand

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

greater freedom at home and in the world. The modern Muslim gentlewomen, the *bhadromohila*, would be born. It would be ludicrous to attempt to locate the moment of her birth. But sometimes between 1920-1940 her personality was forged definitely. In 1911 Rokeya founded Sakhawat Memorial (later transformed into a regular high school in 1932) established and legitimized formal education for Muslim Girls. If one outward sign of the *bhadromohila* were to be sought, one would say it was some years of formal education. This was to remain the visible hallmark of the new personality. The others, i.e new attitudes toward the roles to be assumed in the domestic and public spheres, were not so tangible even if they were equally powerful.

With the founding of the Lady Brabourne College in 1939, institutional education became a firm reality. The infrastructure was created. It was now up to the community to break age old ideological barriers regarding female education, and send its girls out to schools and colleges. While the infrastructural framework was being laid down an equally important ideological debate was taking place in the popular press which in a sense decided the community's response to all the efforts at spreading female education in the region. These debates representing various points of view, conservative, liberal and centrist, formed the substance of an intense and engrossing discourse on woman's public role. While girls broke the bonds of tradition in their daily journey to the neighbourhood school, an equally significant battle was taking place in the popular press - the dailies, journals and tracts.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

CHAPTER V
THE IDEA OF EDUCATION

> ...To mount a successful challenge to the denigration of women, and to assert the value of their minds, meant meeting male authority on its own ground. Women had to gain entry to the process of definition and to the making of meaning... So learning became the next battle ground as it assumed the crucial centrality it holds to this day. — Rosalind Miles[1]

Essayist, publicist, and social reformer, any person who had access to the written word in the early part of the twentieth century in colonial Bengal, dwelt upon female education with the most ardent fervour. Though a few girls' schools had been set up in the preceding century, the question of whether Muslim girls should venture into the outside world for institutionalized education or not, became the matter of public discourse from the early part of the present century. This was also the period in which the Muslim *bhadromohila*'s identity was taking shape in clear outline. For the Hindu, Brahmo and Christian communities the matter had been resolved several decades earlier.

That the issue of female education kept the reading public engaged for a long time is evident from the dominance of this theme in the popular press during the early part of this century. The categorization of discursive writings on education into conservative-reformist, centrist and liberal-reformist, is a matter of analytic convenience. Needless to say, reality in this case, as in others, was fluid. For the Muslims living through the

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[1]Rosalind Miles, *The Women's History of the World*, (London: Paladin, 1989), p.125.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

period of great reformism, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, change was an integral part of daily life. Beliefs, values, mores, customs, rituals — unquestioningly accepted earlier — had now to be discussed and debated upon (e.g. polygamy, female education and notions of purdah and female sexuality). They had to be justified and mediated time and again — and if need arose — remoulded or even rejected. Actually what was happening was that the intelligentsia felt compelled to take various positions on these, within the persuasive reformist ambience. Barring a few who could not read the strength of the winds of change (and they too adapted very fast), most of those who wanted to make a dent in society, realized that reformist one had to be, conservative, centrist or liberal.

The centrists based all educational reforms on religion, on an Islamic golden age glorified, and its tenets interpreted in moderately rational-liberal terms. The liberal stand was also often based on scriptures rationalized, but not necessarily nor always so. The conservatives as we have located them, basically decried the new order and desired and felt that reform should reinforce conservative/traditional values. Ironically, conservative arguments sometimes sounded as if they advocated equality or parity in the educational sphere. This advocacy, however, could not be misconstrued as a liberal plea for equality as it spelt a rejection of all concepts and tools 'modern' and enjoined a return to ultra-traditional modes (i.e. *both* boys and girls should eschew Western learning and return to age-old provisions).

Underlying the controversies regarding female education, was the manipulation of an epistemology. As one writer reviewing the education of Brahmo/Hindu women in colonial Bengal has observed:

> We are confronted in this with the classic mode of arguing by nature and reason, and secondarily, with arguments relatedly based on the 'nature of women' and 'women as nature.' Educational philo-

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> sophy for women was constructed on the basis of these initial epistemological considerations... But what is apparent on the whole is that both pro- and anti-reform schools shared much in common by subscribing to some sort of a notion of argument by nature... Thus reform and reaction shared a similar epistemology, though their different manipulation of the nature-reason binary determined their views on women's education.[2]

Public opinion on education started gaining ground in the early twentieth century when Muslim-edited periodicals and journals increased in circulation and number. In the periodicals of the preceding century such as *Ahmadi (1886), Mihir (1892), Sudhakar (1889)* — copies of which are rarely available today[3] - one gets the idea that female education was not yet an important issue in the popular press. However, there was a discussion of female education as early as 1890 in the periodical *Sudhakar*. In an essay titled "Muslim Stree Siksha", the writer admitted the deplorable condition of women with regard to education and reviewed some suggestions on the matter provided by another paper '*Rais ebong Ryot*'. The matter concerned the establishing of a Muslim Normal School in Calcutta for training of destitute girls from respectable families in basic reading, writing, and embroidery so that they could earn their living. The writer (whose name was not printed) commented:

> We do not approve of this proposal, though we are not opposed to female education. At the moment the condition of male education itself is not heartening. Launching a campaign will be fruitless under the circumstances. It will be more profitable to turn to the matter when the education of males does not need our care any more.[4]

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[2]Himani Banerjee, p.57.

[3]Anisuzzaman's book *Muslim Banglar Samoyik Patro 1831-1930* provides a list of such periodicals and other useful information.

[4]*Sudhakar*, 1:20, 156-157, Chaitra 9, 1296 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

The writer's stand resembled Sir Syed Ahmed's view on the subject.

The next four decades saw the publication of a host of 'liberal' journals such as *Nabanur (1903), Mohammadi (1903), Kohinoor (1915), Saogat (1918), Sadhana (1919), Dhumketu (1922), Bangiya Muslim Sahitya Patrika (1918), Shikha (1927)* and *Masik Mohammadi (1927).*

More 'conservative' and 'centrist' ones appeared as well during the same period: *Islam Pracharak (1891), Nurul Iman (1900), Sultan (1901), Al-Eslam (1915), Islam Darshan (1920), Muezzin (1928).*

We quote from Anisuzzaman the circulation figures for some of these periodicals:[5] *Ahmadi* (600); *Sudhakar* (3000); *Mihir* (500); *Kohinoor* (1000); *Islam Pracharak* (1000); *Nabanur* (800); *Al Eslam* (1500); *Saogat* of 1918 (500–1000); *Nari Shakti* (500); *Sadhana* (1000); *Annessa* (500); *Masik Mohammadi* (5000); and *Shikha* (1000). These figures are based on the number of copies printed, and may provide an idea of the readership of these journals.

The categories like 'liberal', 'centrist', 'conservative', as noted above, are primarily analytical; lines of their demarcation were hazy and shifting. Renowned liberal figures would also write for 'conservative' periodicals and vice versa. An orthodox view regarding polygamy might be offset by a liberal view on education in the same or separate issue of one particular periodical. The boundaries shifted over time as well, and perhaps when the editorship changed hands as sometimes happened. Nonetheless, stands were often taken and sometimes a periodical got associated with a certain brand of thinking or ideological stand which in time became hard to deny. For instance, *Saogat* (and to a lesser extent *Masik Mohammadi*) became famous for its vanguard liberal stand.

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[5]Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Banglar.* See entry for respective periodical.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Chapter V

THE CONSERVATIVES

The issue was taken up at the beginning of the twentieth century. A lady writing for the amalgamated paper *Mihir O Sudhakar* opposed Rokeya Sakhawat's bold views on female emancipation/education published earlier in the journal *Nabanur*. The former lamented that though there was much discourse on the issue, the matter had not been resolved.:

> One group favours female education etc. and another opposes it. At a moment when society is so engrossed with the topic of our education we should come out and say something; as such I present my views on the matter. Female education is desirable, but its boundaries should be set down. That is, knowledge of the holy Koran, Urdu and a little Bengali, is essential in order that girls may understand the meaning of scriptures, religious instructions and advice on ideal female conduct. Ability to read Bengali works like *Lalona Suhrid* is commendable so that girls learn the basics of homemaking, health care, child rearing, care of husband and elders etc... Higher education is not desirable in our opinion; its poisonous effects are easy to gauge...[6]

The writer then went on to disparage Rokeya's sensational article "Amader Abanati" in *Nabanur*, which she criticized thus:

> She [Rokeya] has as a result of her higher education expressed such erroneous views on religion. She has said religious books are the creation of man. Brothers and sisters! See how evil are the results of higher education - that from her pious mouth ensued such anti- islamic, pagan words. Influenced by European ideas Mrs R.S. Hossein has launched this attack on the Koran... Alas that today the holy book has been maligned by a Muslim woman..."[7]

The writer concluded self deprecatingly that she was "but an ordinary

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[6] *Mihir O Sudhakar*, 14 Ashwin, 1311 BS. (n.a.).

[7] Ibid.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Muslim girl who can not stand an attack on religion, where Mrs Hossein is an elderly respectable lady" etc. From the above we can deduce that female education was a potent polemical issue, from the very outset.

"Shikshar Bhitti", published in *Al-Eslam* in 1919, was a conservative's diatribe against liberal educational reform. It apprehended with disdain the 'modern educated woman' (*Shikshita Adhunika Mohila*):

> Of late one finds *mohilas* [sic] who pride themselves as being educated, who rise at eight in the morning to a cup of tea and biscuits, shudder at the thought of the kitchen, idle their time over clothes and cosmetics, who laze on an easy chair, hair unbound, novel in hand or some embroidery, pay no heed to elders and love to venture outside the home instead of staying in the *andar* - what name shall we give them? They are certainly not the *Grihalakshmi* [sic] or the shade giving foliage of a Muslim home.[8]

The author went on to denounce this apparition who on account of her misplaced and dangerous education could not be a blessing for society. In the next issue Rahman tackled the matter at hand viz female education. Replying to those who were lamenting that Muslim women were steeped in ignorance he said: "The very thought of female education makes us sick."[9]

As a somewhat weak modifier to his conservative stand he added that he was not against female education as such, such education as increased a girl's piety, sense of duty to husband, home, children, etc. All he wanted to emphasize was that education along western lines — outside the confines of home where girls in *chemise* and *kamiz* alighted from cars and attended schools to a ripe old age — would bear poisonous fruit for Muslim society. He harked back to the traditional mode of education whereby a girl was

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[8]Sheikh Abdur Rahman, "Shikshar Bhitti", (Bengali) (The basis of education), *Al-Eslam*, 5:7,390, Kartik 1326 BS.

[9]Sheikh Abdur Rahman, ibid., Agrahayan 1326 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

provided by her kith and kin, within the sanctity of home, the essentials of a good education viz., prayer and piety, domestic work, cooking, cleaning, rearing children, nursing, embroidery, tending guests, etc. "The home was her school." But realizing the irreversible tide of events that led to the birth of many "committees and commissions" on female education, among other things, Rahman warned his brethren to adopt a system that would be concomitant with the needs of the community. He then offered concrete suggestions for a girl's primary education in the form of detailed syllabi upto the 6th class. These included traditional subjects: the Koran, Bengali, Urdu, Arithmetic, basic health care, ethics, handwriting, handicrafts, history, geography, etc.

Rahman's article conjured a vivid picture of the 'new woman' of the middle class household - a not very complimentary picture. His sentiment was echoed several years later by a lady (a Muslim *bhadromohila*) writing for *Saogat*. Begum Fatema Lohani conceded that man and woman were like two parts of the same body and cooperation and compassion were essential for smooth functioning. But, said she, if

> ...in imitation of the English, Brahmo or Parsee lady we doll ourselves up, and take to reading novels and plays totally neglecting cooking and other domestic chores like so much garbage, then of course men will not take kindly to our attending educational institutions and going out.[10]

Men would allow this freedom if women, she continued, tried to mould themselves as ideal companions and wives in standing by their husbands' side through all life's vicissitudes. Some concrete tips on achieving this followed — women could profitably spend their time knitting, embroidering flowers on dresses, sewing dresses for the entire family, or perhaps for others,

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[10]Begum Fatema Lohani, 'Nari Samajer Kartabya', (Bengali) (Duty of women) in 'Zanana Mahfil', *Saogat*, Bhadro 1334 BS., 5:3, 275-6.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

thereby earning some money also (instead of spending it on "powder, pomade and perfume"). She concluded that only when women learnt to be ideal homemakers, would men grant them their rights of their own accord.

Here then was a mirror image of the first view which reflected back the negative feelings about the chemise-clad, novel-fed, 'indolent' *adhunika*. In the woman's corner of its Kartik issue, *Saogat* had an article by Taheruddin Ahmed on female education which ultimately succumbed to the conservative point of view on female education. At the outset the oft cited doctrine of women's biological inferiority and handicap due to childbirth, etc. were spelled out to create the context for the arguments presented. The names of famous women were cited: Mary Corelli, George Elliot, Selma Lagrolf, Madame Curie, Sarojini Naidu, etc. The political and economic independence enjoyed by women in Europe and America were evoked. And then the final question posed:

> Whither, then is the world headed? What is the true domain of a woman? What does her nature consist of? Are man and woman created for the same work? Are not their spheres separate? Ought the education of man and woman be the same ?[11]

Although the writer conceded the advantages of reformist projects in Kamal Ataturk's Turkey and the status of women in America and Europe, the lonely sight of "western men and women in nocturnal rounds of the Calcutta parks", convinced the writer of the undesirable outcome of co-education, English education, etc. He agreed women had a right to reach the highest goal of human development through education. As to what kind of education that should be and where obtained, he cleverly left it for women to decide and selected an influential Hindu/Brahmo *bhadromohila*'s opinion to furnish

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[11]Taheruddin Ahmed, "Stree Shiksha"', (Bengali) (Female education), *Saogat*, 5:5, 452, Kartik 1334 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

an example. The writer cited from Srijukta Giribala Sen's presidential address at the annual meeting of the 'Tripura Hita Sadhini Sabha' held the year before:

> The system of education for girls should be different from that of boys. Girls should be specially trained in literature, health, science, home-making, child rearing, music, art, sewing and embroidery. One must remember that a woman is by nature soft, reflective, refined... their minds do not generally turn to Science and Mathematics.[12]

The popular notion of woman's nature was held up again as an unerring touchstone for decisions on female education. Ahmed concluded his piece with the most important aspect of this archetypal woman on the threshold of modernity — motherhood: "Reproduction and rearing the infant, coupled with housework - these comprise a B.A. and M.A. degree [sic] for women. These are her final examinations."[13]

Earlier, Nurunnehar Khatun had raised the issue of formal education in public institutions versus home education in 1919.[14] She conceded that the state of Muslim girls was lamentable. There were a few 'educated' ones, but their learning produced a predilection for the consumption of 'novels and plays' (the *natak* and the novel again, the ubiquitous culprits !). However, educated though the girls certainly might be, attending missionary style or Brahmo style schools devoid of an Islamic atmosphere would not do. So till such time as proper schools for Muslim girls were founded,

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[12]Giribala Sen cited by Taheruddin Ahmed, ibid.

[13]Taheruddin Ahmed, p.453. See also Himani Banerji, "Fashioning a self..", for a demonstration of how the notion of motherhood, women's nature, etc. were being strategically linked up with Brahmo/Hindu female educational reform.

[14]Nurunnehar Khatun, "Nari Jatir Shiksha", (Bengali) (Women's Education), *Saogat*, Jaishtha 1326, 1:7, 521-522.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

girls had better be educated at home, Nurunnehar concluded. By this time Rokeya had set up her famous school for girls in Calcutta but there was no mention of that here.

Fazilatunnessa, had written an article on female education in 1927, but her views were very different from the one cited above. She advocated equal education rights for women.[15] In a subsequent issue of *Saogat*, Rahima Khanam wrote a rejoinder refuting Fazilatunnessa's arguments.[16] Spread of secular female education along western lines where boys and girls would receive the same education, to the same level and in similar manner outside homes, would not, according to Rahima, be beneficial for Muslim society. But the unusual point made in this article was the writer's opposition to the advocacy of nationalism and secularism by Fazilatunnessa. Rahima stressed religiosity and communality insisting that education divorced from Islamic principles was injurious and undesirable. She spelled out in clear, condescending terms that though not all things Indian were bad, but because Muslim civilization was more vigorous, it would be retrogressive to be inspired by the Indian way of life. The Muslims, if they lost themselves in the vast Hindu ocean, would be nothing but a bubble. Rahima in her essay on education articulated the Muslim anxiety regarding loss of identity, where Fazilatunnessa did not express any such fear.

Judging by the standards of the day, the advocacy of secularism, female education, women's rights in other spheres, Hindu-Muslim harmony and a 'nationalist' pan-Indian approach, were perceived to be part of the 'liberal' stance. But alongside this, there was a parallel growth of a separatist feeling which took pride in the Islamic heritage and separate identity

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[15] Fazilatunnessa, "Muslim Nari Shikshar Proyojoniyota", (Bengali) (The Need for Muslim Women's Education), *Saogat*, 5:6, 524-9, Agrahayan 1334 BS.

[16] Rahima Khanam Milky, "Muslim Nari Shikshar Paddhati", (Bengali), (Procedure of Muslim Women's Education), *Saogat*, 5:8, 681, Magh 1334 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

of Muslims. In its orthodox form this mentality decried change and would rather see the old order and its traditional modes preserved. In its reformist form it advocated a conservative adaptation of traditional values and forms to changing ones - a cautious and selective adaptation of new ideas in the spheres of education or the family, always weighing change in the balance of scriptural injunction and established custom.

THE CENTRISTS

By the second and third decades of the twentieth century (Rokeya had established her school, Lila Nag and others had set up theirs, and they with many male writers were uncompromisingly pleading for female education) all shades of Muslim opinion realized that female education and its advocacy had come to stay - one had to read the writing on the wall. That women had a right to education, now no one would be tempted to deny. The debate shifted to another plane. Now, what society had to discourse on was what kind of education it should be, and to what level and for what purpose.

Often, apparently contradictory views were entertained by the same author in the same piece of writing, not to mention different pieces. For instance, Abdul Hakim could ask denigratingly "what guarantee is there that this education (western one) will not make our girls wayward, addicted to novels and plays and cigarettes like veritable *bibis*?"[17] And in the same breath he could go on to condone this by stating that such a life was indeed not at all bad. But Bengali Muslims could afford this only if they learnt to be more self-dependent and thrifty, he pointed out. Further down

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[17] A. F. M. Abdul Hakim, "Nari Samasya", (Bengali) (The Women's Problem), *Saogat*, 5: 9, 767, Magh 1334 BS. The term *Bibi* (originally *Biwi*, an Urdu word) was used by Bhabanicharan Banerjee in *Nababibi Bilas* to designate the new 'woman of leisure', the female counterpart to the *babu*.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

the writer strongly recommended female readers to read Begum Fatema Lohani's somewhat ambivalent and diluted piece which elucidated the duties of women at that critical juncture in history. He concluded by eulogizing women such as Rokeya, Shamsunnahar, Razia Khatun, Nurunnessa, Kasema Khatun, etc. A few among these women were established liberals with very definite and sometimes radical views on female education.

Ambivalences like these were soon coalescing into what may be termed a centrist point of view. The centrists sometimes presented conservative argument in liberal guise (M. Wajed Ali's "Stree Shiksha"), or liberal arguments which broke down in the face of an ultimate conservative reali- zation (Kasema's "Narir Katha"), or a conservative premise adjusting to liberal principles (Imdadul Huq's "Dharma", etc.). Centrists went to some length to elucidate the full range of issues involved in the discourse on women's education. They highlighted the natural differences between men and women - physical and psychological. According to this camp, nature had ordained different functions for men and women and as such different spheres. There never had been equality for the sexes nor would there be. Such equality could result in the eventual breakdown of family life. But the centrists also perceived themselves as 'modern' and Wajed Ali for instance terms those who oppose female education as old- fashioned. Women should receive education but its aim should always be to augment their role as mother, housewife, sister. Knowledge about the world was important for the woman's mind must be freed but this enlightenment coupled with domestic science (the contents of her education) should never jeopardize her role in the home.

Some writers based their advocacy of female education on a comparison with other communities, e.g. the Brahmo, or the Muslims, in revolutionary Turkey and Egypt. In contemporary times Turkey was a favorite model - Shirazi even wrote a tract, *Turki Nari Jiban*, in praise of the freedom

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

enjoyed by Turkish women. Another favorite exercise was of course to travel back in time to golden ages of Islam - to Moorish Cordova, or Mamun's Baghdad, or even earlier to the age of the Prophet himself. This put reformists ever anxious about conservative opinion on fairly solid ground. Examples from Islamic history also provided an opportunity to criticize the ways of the west — its educational and familial structures, gender relations, etc.— as cautionary diatribes against indiscriminate adoption of occidental forms. Simultaneously, it provided Muslim publicists the sorely needed grounds to refute the allegation that Islam was barbarous to its women and had never accorded them legal and educational status. Kasema Khatun achieved all this in her article "Narir Katha". Her assertion was that so long as men and women kept within Islamic ideals, reform would be wholesome and beneficial. Equality of right to education was conceded but the content should be based on tradition. Kasema denounced western education as she thought it emanated from materialism and atheism. This had led certain "misdirected youths who having imported the materialist learning of the West, lead a life of indolence and vice".[18]

The centrists' arguments laid a lot of anxiety regarding modernizing reforms, to rest. Such anxiety was neutralized by writings which demonstrated that female education was compulsory according to the Koran. The Prophet himself had shown great respect for women's learning (his wife Ayesha was a renowned authority on *Hadith*). *Al-Eslam* pointed this out:

> In spite of strict injunctions in Islamic scriptures regarding female education, girls have been neglected for centuries... Till such times as girls are educated with equal, nay greater care as boys...,

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[18]Kasema Khatun, "Narir Katha", (Bengali), (Women's words), *Saogat*, 4:1,48, Asharh 1333 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Muslim society will be steeped in ignorance.[19]

Ismail Hossain Shirazi's *Stree Shiksha*, a tract on female education, was first read out at an assembly in 1904 and later published in 1907 from Calcutta[20]. A relentless social critic, Shirazi in writing his tract was in effect drawing up a manifesto of Muslim women's educational reform, and came very close to the thought of liberals like Rokeya. If one were to pick out one representative document advocating female education from the mass of contemporary literature on the subject (a difficult task indeed), it would have to be *Stree Shiksha*. Surveying Muslim society in Bengal, Shirazi lamented its pitiful decline and degeneration. The most significant factor behind this decline was the debased condition of women: a) their ignorance due to lack of education and b) their stunted growth physical and mental due to the practice of *aborodh* (total seclusion) which he like other women referred to as a perverted form of purdah. Having set the context, Shirazi went on to establish the doctrinal grounds of his advocacy on a reinterpretation of scriptures. Firstly, it was a great sin - he declared - to deprive a human being of his freedom and dignity, a condition tantamount to slavery (allowed scripturally only in time of war or for self defence):

> There is no sin on earth like that of depriving a human being of his or her freedom. Imprisonment is a fate worse than death. The nation which banishes women, mothers of its progeny, into the prison of the *antahpur*, and thinks it is following religious injunction, is treading the path to oblivion.[21]

To banish women to the *antahpur* was akin to enslavement. Seclusion or

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[19]Sheikh Abdul Gafur Jalali, "Shiksha Bistarer Upay", (Bengali) (Means of spreading education), *Al-Eslam*, 5:4, 180-181, Sravan 1326 BS.

[20]Parts of it were also published in serialized form in *Al-Eslam* in 1916 under different names.

[21]Ismail Hossain Shirazi, *Stree Shiksha*, p.2

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

aborodh was thus an act of rebellion against God (*Ishwar-drohita*).

Secondly, religion could not exist without knowledge. The Koran was revealed to human kind, because humans unlike animals are capable of knowledge. The Koran was meant for both men and women and its message could be comprehended by 'those who know'. Hence depriving women of knowledge which should be qualitatively the same for men and women, was also a grievous sin.

Thus the citadel of *aborodh* resulting in barring women from education and other aspects of public life was erected, says Shirazi, on a mis-reading of scriptures. Striking at the very kernel, he showed that piety which had no basis in knowledge (the ability to distinguish right from wrong) or in experience (exposure to the world/society at large in all its complexity, temptation and glory), was in effect useless and unfit in worship of the creator. Shirazi apprehended the counter argument that could be raised at this point viz that moral education within the *andarmahal* would suffice, but he was in favour of advances made by human society and the harnessing of all available social resources at a given point in time. As a result he advocated formal education for girls in girls' schools and colleges and participation of women in public life provided precautions for purdah were taken. Shirazi cited *Hadith* (Tradition): "A moment of scientific thought is more precious than a hundred years of prayer."

To make the case stronger Shirazi turned to the golden age of Islam when women were learned, fought wars and bore healthy children. Contemporary models were also upheld — Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Morocco and Tripoli. The Brahmo example was also cited. In other articles, however, Shirazi could put down the Hindu/Brahmo community by tracing the origin of seclusion among Indian Muslims to the debased status of women in ancient and medieval Hindu society. Such ambivalences were characteristic of even the liberal Muslim intelligentsia, not to mention the

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

centrist and orthodox ones, who were busy forging a dignified past for Islam, and a separate (but not necessarily communal or antagonistic yet) Muslim identity. Though Shirazi grounded his arguments on scriptures, his techniques were modern. His aim was to make scriptural tenets totally compatible with the reformist objectives of the day.

The issue of sexuality was intricately wound up with that of education. It would not be an oversimplification to say that the question that perplexed most *bhadro* households — to send their daughters to school or not, the purdah education dilemma — was ultimately sexual in nature. Stepping out into public institutions and exposure to new ideas would jeopardize purdah which served the function of surveillance, regulation and containment of female sexuality. At every step in the direction of education lurked an uneasy fear of compromising purdah. The reformers had to address the issue at every stage and resolve the problem, demonstrating why and how institutional education need not threaten the observance of purdah. Sometimes the matter was tackled head on as in "Sahashiksha" (Co-education) published in 1933, the year after Rokeya's demise. The author was appalled at the encouragement given to the 'rubbish proposition' of co-education by the editor of *Mohammadi*. He put the misled advocates of co-education squarely in their place and cited from Dr Pramathnath Mukherjee's presidential address where the latter had talked about the possible moral dangers of co-education in a region where sexual precocity was high. Hindu male opinion could thus coincide, we find, nicely with the Muslim one when it came to the ultimate question of regulating sexual behavior and drawing boundaries. The task of setting boundaries - erasing old ones and putting new ones in their place - was taken up gallantly by the liberals.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

THE LIBERALS

The Muslim liberals in Bengal were the great cultural synthesizers of the period.[22] In the first half of the twentieth century they played the role of modern day cultural mediators whose syncretizing act now spanned *not merely Hindu and Muslim, but orthodox and liberal, traditional and modern, as well.* The liberals' task was urgent and manifold. The neighbouring Hindu/Brahmo community had a fifty year head start and they would have to accelerate the process of modernization in their own community. They set themselves certain tasks. In fact it was on account of the items on their agenda that they came to be perceived as liberals. The term itself (its Bengali would be *Udar naitik*) was not in use at the time. We have instead '*nabya muslim, 'adhunik shikshito sampraday*', etc. Among the items in the liberal agenda were:

a) a rational interpretation of religion;

b) the creation of a golden age of Islam (which looked suspiciously modern !);

c) furnishing models of social reform viz the Brahmo Community, modernized Turkey under Mustafa Kamal (and occasionally Europe and America);

d) and construction of the new woman through education (part of their overall women's reform project).

These were all integral parts of the greater project of modernization. Nearly all liberal writings lamenting the condition of Muslim society put the blame squarely on the degraded status of women particularly their lack of access to education. Female education was recommended by most as a panacea for many social evils.

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[22]One may recall in this context Asim Roy's usage of the term Bengal Muslim Cultural Mediators to designate those in the Muslim Community who have, since the medieval period, managed to syncretize Islamic and indigenous cultural forms and beliefs in the region. See Chap. I.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Ameer Ali was a western educated man who had the opportunity to attain higher education in England. Moreover, he was married to a foreigner and presumably enjoyed the companionship of an educated and enlightened woman. In 1899 at the meeting of the all India Education Conference held in Calcutta, Ameer Ali reiterated his view that boys and girls should be provided with the same kind of education without which there would be no societal progress. Any debasement in women's status (of which education is an indicator as well as a determinant) would only lead to disharmony as society moves forward on the contribution of both. Ameer Ali was more of a theoretician articulating women's educational rights like Rokeya, but unlike her he never embarked on an active campaign.

In the same year (1899), he recreated the golden age of Islam through an article 'The Influence of Women in Islam', in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*. This golden age spanned many centuries and countries. Substantiated amply with historical data, Ameer's golden age was indeed glorious for women. They taught in universities as mentors to the most renowned scholars, they governed, mediated diplomatic transactions, adjudicated, threw parties, set new trends in fashion, all before the coming of the veil and none of it in contravention of Islamic injunctions. Coming down to India, he felt that traditional Muslim education would not carry women far.

Ameer Ali did not mean that the long established custom of purdah "should be abandoned in its entirety". Muslims of India could follow the example of their brethren in Constantinople where women moved freely, participated in the social economy, edited journals, and wrote histories. The other example he cited was interesting in that it recorded a direct reference to Brahmo women's reform, by an elite member of the Muslim Community in Bengal:

> The honest reformer can take heart by the example of the Brahmo ladies who for the last fifty years have held their position in

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Indian society with dignity and self-respect.[23]

Ameer Ali continued his rationalizing project in his widely acclaimed book, *Spirit of Islam: A History of Evolution and Ideals of Islam*, (1922).

The rationalization of religion was a very important aspect of the liberal project. Thus Kazi Emdadul Huq propounded that the Koran meant, above all things, knowledge. The Muslims once ruled (in that 'golden age'), by dint of arms and knowledge. Disempowered, their role was now taken over by the English. It was therefore important for Muslims to empower themselves by following in the footsteps of the English and women too would have to undertake the journey. Emdadul Huq was categorical in advocating English education and women's education. Those who opposed these were according to him, humbugs. In this Huq was less ambivalent than many other liberals.

One of the foremost rationalizers was Rokeya. In "Amader Abanoti" and, "Ardhangi", she went to some pains to demonstrate that Islam rationally interpreted, enjoined an equal education for girls. Far from being forbidden by scriptures, Rokeya and other women writers, e.g. Ayesha Ahmed and Feroza Begum, pointed out that Islam made it obligatory to educate females. Anyone who did not do so was not a good Muslim. In the golden age when society was ruled by just and rational principles, women were educated and enjoyed high status.

Wajed Ali, a Cambridge barrister and renowned liberal, also joined in the rationalizing project. In 1931 he embarked upon issues relating to polygamy, concubinage, inheritance, women's gainful employment, divorce, and female education. Women's disadvantaged situation in all of these in Muslim society, he felt were due to a misinterpretation and irrational

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[23]Ameer Ali, 'The Influence of women in Islam', *The Nineteenth Century*, London, May 1899, p.773.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

reading of scriptures. Widespread reform based on the principles of enlightenment was called for. Islamic tenets, he argued could never be in conflict with reason and logic. A similar rationalizing was undertaken by Abdur Rashid who raised the pertinent question in an essay in *Shikha* bearing a title directly addressing the issue "Our Renaissance and the Scriptures":

> Now the question is, is it possible for Muslims to obey the dictates of scriptures and modern science simultaneously? I say it is. *Sharia* is sacred; but we may adapt it to the requirements of modern times without compromising it.[24]

Many of the other *Shikha* members were solely concerned with establishing the legitimacy of a rational interpretation of religion.

Women other than Rokeya also shared in liberal views. Mrs M. Rahman in "Purdah Banam Probonchona" (1920), deliberated upon a liberal interpretation of scriptures, the Islamic Golden Age, purdah and its distortion *aborodh*, etc. The coming age made a new reckoning imperative, for this was the Age of Reason. She declared:

> In this age of our Awakening, we shall not bow blindly to religion nor accept ritual as its substitute.[25]

The writer, like others, reiterated that it was the institution of so called purdah degenerated into *aborodh*, which formed a practical and ideological barrier for women. Relevant passages were also cited to demonstrate that in the Golden Age of the Prophet and the Khalifas, purdah was simply observed by a *chadar* and later by a *burqa* which in no way deterred women from a public role. Women moved unfettered, performing all manner of tasks, attending marketplaces, seminaries, mosques. But later woman's

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[24]Abdur Rashid, "Amader Nabajagaran O Shariat", (Bengali), (Our Renaissance and Scriptures), *Shikha*, 1st year, p.93, Chaitra 1333 BS.

[25]Mrs M. Rahman, "Purdah banam Probonchona", (Bengali) (Purdah versus Deprivation), *Saogat*, 7:1, 68, Bhadro 1336 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

rights were curtailed and she was turned into a consumable commodity (e.g. the *andarmahal* dwelling, scantily clad, woman of the Muslim gentry.) Mrs Rahman firmly grounded the impetus for reform in *shariat.*

The questions of female education had engaged the Hindu/Brahmo publicists for decades. The Women's Question was undoubtedly one of wide concern, and the New Muslims often vied with Hindu Brahmo *bhadrolok* in these reformist issues. "Stree Shiksha O Stree Swadhinata", an article written by Khirodkumar Das in *Sadhana* in 1920, by its very title suggested the over-reaching nature of the contents. But its real significance was in the synthesizing attempted here. Das brought out the polemics clearly:

> The most difficult problem is how we can serve both ends and resolve the dilemma posed by orthodox and liberal regarding the nature and extent of female education.[26]

Das pointed out, that according to one camp, since ancient times woman has served man and it has been her lot to provide comfort and joy to man and maintain stability and purity in society. Higher education would only jeopardize these. According to the other camp, women should be allowed to develop as full individuals capable of realizing their rights and status alongside men, at all costs. If chaos is the outcome of this process, so be it. The reconciliation of these views Das maintained, could be achieved by realizing that enhanced ethical behaviour and sense of morality were the goals of education. Once the good mother (a great favourite of the times) and good wife logic were added to the above arguments the prevalent fear could almost be subverted, a feat the liberals performed quite successfully. Das displayed a typical *bhadrolok* caution towards the end of his article for he maintained that however beneficial, too much emancipation, too soon,

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[26]Shri Khirodkumar Das, "Stree Shiksha O Stree Swadhinata", (Bengali) (Female Education and Female Liberty), *Sadhana*, 2:11, 427, Falgun 1327 BS

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was not to be recommended.[27]

Some women were even more vocal than men in advocating female education. Writing for the *Mohila* issue of *Saogat* in 1929, Ayesha Ahmed summed up the cause for the sorry state of things: "The deplorable state of women is the main deterrent to progress in Muslim society."[28]

Ayesha's reinterpretation of scriptures was on some points, typical of the liberal group. She wanted to know if the so called true Muslims who proclaimed that they had carried out the prophet's will had followed his injunctions regarding women's rights in education, property, etc. Ayesha gave vent to other concerns of this school but like Rokeya she went a few steps further. She conceded that chastity and motherhood were a woman's precious attributes and a liberal education would doubtless aid in preserving these. But having conceded this she went on to say that woman had a public role alongside those of mother and wife:

> Untold harm will result from confining woman to her role of mother and Guardian angel of the home.[29]

Innate to this school of thought was a belief in a progressive social evolution. In fact, true to the Darwinist notions of progress which must have filtered down into the twentieth century, and been fashionabe at the time, Ayesha used the very term 'survival of the fittest' in a somewhat novel context. In a highly competitive age, she set down, a society could not survive if the resources of men and women were not pooled together. Such

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[27]As early as 1890, Krishabhabini Das had used a similar argument. As Himani Banerji observes: "She turns the patriarchal notion of women as 'natural mothers' on its head, and uses it as the reason for the upliftment of women's education." See Himani Banerji, p.57.

[28]Ayesha Ahmed, "Muslim Samajer Unnotir Antorai," (Bengali) (Impediments to Progress in Muslim Society), *Saogat*, 7:1, 41, Bhadra 1336 BS.

[29]Ayesha Ahmed, ibid. She used '*Shobhadayini*', a word which is very rich and difficult to translate - one who augments the beauty (of home).

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a situation would only accrue, if man and woman — both organs of the same 'body social' — were allowed to function to their true capacity. This necessitated the full development of a woman's potential, she concluded. The restoration of equality between two organs of the same (social) organism — was an imagery which ran through the works of many writers in this period. Ayesha professed belief in woman's nature comprising of the attributes: love, compassion, tenderness, shyness, motherliness and purity. But if emancipation posed a threat to these, there should be no reason to draw back - she declared in a tone not very familiar to liberals. Once awakened, women would question male oppression Ayesha admitted, a fate society had better accept for its own good. She did not water down the argument into a wishy washy mixture that liberals were sometimes wont to favour. Her plea to break the bond of tradition was clear and undiluted. She upheld the example of Turkey's modernization under the rule of Kamal Attaturk and the '*Nari Nobo Jagoron*' there; she also cited the example of the West where women were participating in the public sphere in full measure as politicians, scientists, writers, athletes, mechanics, engineers. Women were visible everywhere. Ayesha dared to pose the ultimate feminist question regarding human biology: "Does this not prove woman is in no way inferior to man in bodily strength?"[30]

Ayesha's sentiment was echoed by Feroza Begum writing in the same issue of *Saogat*, in a short piece titled 'Amader Shikshar Proyojoniyota'. Feroza hit the orthodox discourse right away by denouncing *mullas* as the greatest hindrance to female education. In elucidating the need for female education, however, Feroza struck a more familiar 'liberal' tone by pointing to the necessity of female education for creating model mothers, housewives and companions. She also pointed to the middle class nature of the prob-

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[30]Ayesha Ahmed, ibid., p.42.

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lem, for female education *was* a middle class concern:

> Today Muslim sisters and mothers need freedom and education. Those who are familiar with middle class society, know that in every home there is responsibility, but no love - duty, but no joy.[31]

A few years earlier, Mrs M. Rahman also made a similar plea for female education but it was characterized by an unusual passion. She deplored the inadequate education imparted to women in the traditional system which she felt comprised of a mechanical reading of the Koran and bore down on patriarchy with vengeance:

> Eons of oppression and insult have made us like tigers and snakes. We shall suck the blood of our tyrants to avenge ourselves; we shall pour our poison into them in repeated stings to ease our burning and shame.[32]

Another woman who was vocal in attacking patriarchy's use of scriptures for its own ends was Fatema Khanam. In an article for *Shikha*, the mouthpiece of the Dhaka based *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* (Emancipation of Intellect Movement), she wrote:

> Women have been disempowered. And consequently, men have used the weapons of scriptures and heavenly chastisement to crush women with the weight of purdah. And they have gone strutting about as if for them there was neither scripture nor chastisement.[33]

Liberals left no stone unturned in their advocacy. It was argued that edu-

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[31] Feroza Begum, "Amader Shikshar Proyojoniyota", (Bengali) (The Need for Our Education), *Saogat*, 7:1, 67, Bhadra 1336 BS.

[32] Mrs M. Rahman, "Amader dabi", (Bengali) (Our demands), *Dhumketu*-Sandhya Pradeep, 10, (Ashwin 1329 BS), p.8.

[33] Mamlukul Fatema Khanam, "Taruner Dayitwa", (Bengali), (Duties of Youth), *Shikha* (1929), cited in Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Banglar*, p.491.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

cating girls specially in domestic science, instead of enhancing indolence, idleness and a craving for novels, would bring economic benefits to the household in the guise of a house-keeper who could sew and knit (reducing tailor's costs), keep proper accounts, spend wisely etc. Doubting Thomases were therefore asked to set aside their fears about the *adhunika* and take heart from the vision of the thrifty wife.

Numerous articles echoed the sentiments above. These were being churned out in the 1920s and 1930s when the *bhadromohila* were making their presences felt, through education, through writing, through changed roles in all spheres. *Saogat* was to change its logo in the ladies section, within ten years, from "Zanana Mahfil" to "Mohila Jogot". Faziltunnessa, Badrunnessa Khatun, Sakina Farrukh Sultan, Razia Khatun - not to mention Rokeya Sakhawat - promoted the cause of female education in articles which bore names such as "Stree Shiksha", "Muslim Nari Shikshar Proyojoniyota", "Muslim Nari Mukti", etc. In "Bangiyo Muslim Mohilagoner Shikshar dhara", Razia Khatun provided an unusual argument for female education, one not encountered, in as many words, before. She introduced her argument by referring to Margaret Urquhart's *Women of Bengal* (1925):

> Recently, a foreign lady has written a book about the women of Bengal where she discusses the section which is most inclined to female education. Needless to say these are the prostitutes. They send their girls to schools, not to acquire good husbands, but better to ply their trade. Prostitutes have understood that the young educated man of today prefer the company of these educated and accomplished girls... What the modern educated youths do not get from wives at home, or from women in society at large, yet that which is so desirable on account of Western education and the spirit of the age they seek among these smart, educated prostitutes.[34]

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[34] Razia Khatun, "Bangiyo Moslem Mohilagoner Shikshar Dhara", (Bengali), (The Trend of Muslim Women's Education in Bengal), *Saogat* 5:1, 71, Asharh 1334 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Much ink was spilled over the type and extent of female education and its objective, once the issue of whether it should be imparted, was settled or even while it was being discussed. The issue was also raised in 1903 by Maulvi Imdadul Huq. Alluding to those who objected to higher education for women he said he would have no patience with "this high education, low education business". Education whether for a boy or girl, had to be proper and complete.[35]

Kazi Motahar Hossain, a renowned leader of the *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* in Dhaka, admitted in an essay in *Saogat* in 1931, that in spite of the fundamental differences between a boy and a girl, it was obnoxious to think that girls should be confined to the study of embroidery, cookery and writing letters to husband, etc. He found no justification for barring them from the study of philosophy, literature or history. He criticized those who thought women's education should be on different lines - that they did not need B.A. or M.A. degrees as they were never going to be bureaucrats or doctors. He pointed out that they had forgotten the noble objective of education - development of a human being's full potential. To think that a girl's education was just to make her fit for a modern husband was a heinous thought![36]

Although Kazi Motahar granted woman her individuality unstintingly, he stopped short of total liberalism in excluding gainful employment as an objective of female education. This, however, was the prevailing liberal attitude and only a very few departed from this. An avowed progressive like Hossain could say that the work of a mason did not befit woman as embroidery did not befit a man. In its editorial, in 1927, *Saogat* dealt with

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[35]Emdadul Huq B.A.,"Amader Shiksha", (Bengali), (Our Education), *Nabanur*, 1:3, 93, Asharh 1310 BS.

[36]Kazi Motahar Hossain, "Bangali Musulmaner Dainyo", (Bengali), (Cultural poverty of Bengali Muslims), *Saogat*, 8:6, 201, Magh 1337 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

the issue of differential education with characteristic wit:

> We are clamouring that we want our women to receive education, but not higher education. We agree that a B.A. is not necessary for producing babies or keeping the home tidy. But all must concede that in that case a B.A. is neither required, surely, to lead the congress, or execute the duties of a minister, or clerk in a government office! Motherhood requires not a B.A., nor does clericalism.[37]

In the thought of Rokeya Sakhawat one finds both the limits of liberal ideology and its transcension. Rokeya's philosophy of education (gleaned from her numerous writings) had two aspects a conformist and a non-conformist one. It was being spelt out in the heyday of the liberal assault — at the same time as Shirazi, Wajid Ali, Abul Fazl, Lutfur Rahman, Kazi Motahar Hossain and others were expounding their views on women's reform. Rokeya's thought exhibited almost all the characteristics discussed above. They were all in it together - the rationalization of scriptures, evocation of the golden age, the painstaking creation of the new woman in all her positive aspects. But where Rokeya differed from the others was in her ability to see education not as an end in itself, or at best as an aid to woman's familial role, but as a means to women's economic independence. For here was the last forbidden boundary - education as a means to wage work. The sexual and the economic, these were the two areas in which the liberal Muslim *bhadrolok* like his Hindu/Brahmo counterpart, was not willing to change his outlook. Over this he retained his traditional grip.

Rokeya was fully aware of this. But though she agreed on the first count, she did not on the second. (True time and again Rokeya referred to the goals of education - to produce the good mother, wife, companion,

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[37]See Editorial, "Stree Shiksha" (Bengali), (Female Education), *Saogat*, 5:9, 777, Poush 1334 BS.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

the good Muslim; but this was only one aspect of her advocacy). In her effort to popularize female education in a society that laid great stress on domestic values, Rokeya upheld the perfect house-holder, good wife and good companion argument. In her 'domestic', pieces she reiterated this invariably linking superior domesticity with good education. But while demonstrating the need of education in order to produce the "guardian of society and hearth - the *grihalakshmi*" she promoted the study of physics, chemistry and horticulture, which makes one wonder how far Rokeya had the 'home' in her mind and how far the 'world'.[38]

Rokeya's ruthless logic and belief in women's equality drove her to dimensions seldom reached by others. In 1931, the year before her death she proclaimed: "We need an ideal educational institution where our girls can equip themselves to keep pace with other communities. If women of other communities can become doctors, lawyers, councillors and politicians, why should our girls be deterred?"[39] Rokeya was an ultimate blend of pragmatism and idealism, of conservatism and radicalism. In her major writings on education[40] Rokeya slipped in one or two sentences advocating women's right to work and education as a means for this. But by and large, she stressed the more prevalent attitudes regarding female education in her public life. It was in her fiction that she allowed possibilities of female education to develop to its full economic significance. For to Rokeya female education was the great solution to the prevailing social malaise in the nation, not just her community. She never strayed far from her histor-

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[38]See Rokeya S. Hossein, "Sugrihini", *R.R.*, p.46.

[39]R. S. Hossein, "Dhangser Pathe Bangiyo Muslim", (Bengali) (Muslims on the Road to Annihilation), *Masik Mohammadi*, Jaishtha 1338, *R.R.* p.301.

[40]*Ardhangi, Sugrihini,* Bangiya Nari Shiksha Samiti presidential address, *Dhangsher Pothe Bangiyo Muslim*, and *Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian girl.*

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

ically determined role of synthesization.

Rokeya's was not the only voice in the matter of women's economic emancipation. In 1920 Tarikul Alam in an essay placed woman on a completely equal footing with man in terms of physical and mental capacity and traced women's historically subordinate role to the gradual loss of economic power. It was time society started to consider the prospect of woman earning her own livelihood, the essay maintained. But, the circumstances Alam introduced to substantiate his advocacy, e.g. widowhood, showed that the issue had to be spelt out within the parameters of family roles. The time had not come where one could stand up and say society should allow a woman the opportunity to earn her livelihood per se, widowed or not. There was no niché in society yet for the 'respectable single working woman'. Whatever people thought about it, they kept to themselves. Rokeya was working out a place for single women at 'Tarini Bhavan' - but this was in her fiction - her novel, *Padmarag*.[41]

Rokeya's sentiments were echoed by Ayesha Ahmed in "Muslim Samajer Unnatir Antorai". In her article Ayesha had asked:

> In the west women are found in all professions - from politics to engineering. Instead of bestowing their daughters an good or bad hands, which may lead to a life of misery guardians should, in particular cases, see that girls are capable of earning their own living. This does not compromise a family's honour. Women should be allowed to earn their own livelihood in a respectable (*bhadro*) manner. This will also solve economic problems.[42]

The voice that joined Rokeya and Ayesha in this unusual advocacy, was that of Mrs M. Rahman's. In her column in *Dhumketu* she raised the issue

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[41]See Chapters VI and VII.

[42]Ayesha Ahmed, *Saogat*, p.43.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

of women's economic independence and the Indian male's colonial plight:

> A French countess has recently asked 'How can you expect liberty without a penny to your name?' True, what can be achieved by those like us who have no economic independence? But we can not keep still. Nor can we ask the men to do anything. What can they, poor souls do, who take whatever bounty their colonial lords hand out to them?[43]

But even so, only some professions were deemed respectable enough for the women of the middle class gentry, the *bhadromohila*, as Abul Fazl pointed out while he was reviewing an article by a certain *bhadromohila* on the Muslim women's awakening:

> Miss Nurjehan's query was, how are Muslim girls to emerge out into the world. She provides two answers: as teachers and doctors... Perhaps women now realize writing letters and keeping househod-accounts won't suffice.[44]

Education was the first mediator linking the private and public spheres for women. It forced the debate between purdah and public participation (such as school attendance) to surface. The subject of education was thus tied up with sexuality. Contemporary orthodox discourse was busy trying to establish that female education outside the house along western lines as advocated by the liberal Bengali intelligentsia, would be threatening to the moral and domestic order. Liberals were so busy trying to establish that it would not, that it had little time left over to veer the topic in other directions. By the third decade of the century, the issue was more or less decided in favour of female education.

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[43]Mrs M. Rahman, "Amader Swarup", (Bengali), (Our True Identity), *Dhumketu*, No.13, Ashwin 1329 BS, p.10.

[44]Abul Fazl, in *Abul Fazl Rachanabali*, pp.642-643.

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However, now the debates entered a new plane - the context or modus operandi of the new educational system. To what level should women be educated; in what manner? What should the contexts of this education be? (if rudimentary knowledge of religious texts, and some literature if the family were upper class, would not suffice) Should the syllabus be the same as for boys? Should boys and girls study together or separately? And what was the ultimate objective of the education - a development of moral and intellectual faculties to enable optimum functioning as good mother, efficient housewife, and companion, or something else besides?

Ghulam Murshid studying the response of Brahmo and Hindu women to modernization could conclude:

> One can here pose a simple question. What did these women want to achieve by education? Despite a few exceptions the overwhelming majority of newly educated women, like their male counterparts, considered the chief aims of education were to get well-placed and educated bridegrooms, and to be better wives.[45]

But Murshid points out that these were the chief aims of female education in other parts of the world as well, including the occident. However, he also concedes that the nineteenth century *bhadromohila* were aware of a more subtle gain: "Apart from these benefits relating to their every day life, the educated women were conscious that education would elevate them from the inglorious social position they were occupying."[46]

Murshid was writing about women of the latter half of the nineteenth century. For Muslim women who were participating in the process of modernization in the early part of this century, and beginning their metamorphosis into the Muslim *bhadromohila*, this was largely true too. However,

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[45]Murshid, *The Reluctant* p.56.

[46]Murshid, p.58.

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an examination of contemporary discursive material reveals that thoughts on the objectives of education other than producing the good companion and wife, did engage some (a very few thinkers). The economic aspect of education as a means to livelihood and power, was considered by Rokeya Sakhawat, Tarikul Alam, Nazrul Islam, Ayesha Ahmed, Abul Fazl and others. But the topic of women's wagework was raised very cautiously, and with various disclaimers and modifications.

In those changing times, it was difficult to make out who stood where, or what colour a person chose to wear. What was constant was the self-questioning and seeking after truths and resolutions. What the centre of line publicists achieved, was significant for the development of the liberal discourse. They laid a lot of social anxiety regarding modernizing reforms to rest. By upholding Islamic ideals, and the golden age and harping upon good mothering and house wifery as the ultimate goals of education and by decrying the novel addicted *adhunika*, they allayed fears of impending or proposed changes. They forged bridges between seventh century Islam and post enlightenment European thought by 'inventing a tradition' (to use Eric Hobswam's famous phrase). In the process of inventing the golden age both Hindu and Muslim reformers constructed "a particular kind of past which was the context for the construction also of a particular kind of womanhood. The past itself was a creation of the compulsions of the present."[47]

This invocation of the past, of tradition or scriptures, was necessary, one realizes, if reform was to have a wider base. But in providing a wider base for reform, such a position ultimately also weakened it. As had happened in the era of Brahmo/Hindu reform in the nineteenth century, the reformers' attempts to ground change in the scriptures or *shastra* ultimately adversely affected the ultimate success of the reformist project. By

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[47] Uma Chakravarty, "Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi?" in Sangari and Vaid (eds), p.78.

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looking to the scriptures for sanction of their reformist activity, they unconsciously fixed the bases of change in a backward looking process which precluded a really secular base.[48]

Similarly, the Muslim reformer's evocation of the *sharia* widened the reform base but simultaneously also weakened its potential strength by not really grounding reform on a more secular foundation. For this, scholars have evaluated the great era of Hindu and Muslim reform (c.1850-1940) as one which simultaneously reinstituted new forms of patriarchal subjection while freeing women from existing ones. The limitations of *bhadrolok* educational (and other) reform stemmed from this inherent contradiction.

The liberals (and a very small radical section represented by some of Rokeya's writings, and those of a few others) were undoubtedly the most prolific as their output in contemporary journals testify. The 1930s and 40s were their decades. But education was the dominant issue which engaged all groups of early twentieth century reformers. Conservative, centrist and liberal thought rallied round to project and promote their points of view on what comprised women's education and its objectives. Those who did not welcome institutional education at first had to bow to the changed order of things and shift their arguments to what kind of education and why.

The consensus seemed to be that female education should be different from male, on some very important counts which arose from the perceived notions of feminine nature and the spheres of their separate activity. It was held that women were by nature more suited to a certain kind of education such as the liberal arts and home- economics. Since the *bhadromohila* did not have to earn a living, vocational and professional education were not for them. The entire objective of education thus became the prod-

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[48]This has been lucidly pointed out by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in Introduction, *Recasting Women.*

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

uction of good mothers, efficient house-wives and enlightened companions.

Women themselves were not silent on the matter. The chief vehicle of their views was their writings. Writing not only served to make their voices heard on issues of reform and change, it was the mark of a new creativity which had touched men and women in the period. In this sense it was a major activity of the *bhadromohila* - both a functional as well as an expressive one. The ability and desire to write, along with education, were the hallmarks of the new type of women.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

CHAPTER VI
GROWTH OF CREATIVITY AMONG MUSLIM BHADROMOHILA

Education in whatever form and degree, had prepared women for the act of writing. Women in the traditional andarmahal had always wielded the pen; but with the advent of the new form of education under colonial rule they stepped into a new era of creativity. That is, there were significant changes in the medium in which they wrote, the style they used, the genres they selected, the topics they chose and the platforms they sought. All of these would not have been possible for women of preceding ages as these were modes and artifacts of the reformist period. In the Muslim tradition of Northern India, women wrote histories or autobiographies and biographies, while in Bengal they composed *punthi* style works. But the *bhadromohila* seldom selected the latter form of writing. It must be mentioned, however, that such activity had hitherto been confined to women of the upper class only and that too to women of exceptional talent. But in the reformist and post-reformist age, large numbers of women took up the pen and in doing so also had to break the stigma that had come to be attached to women's writing in the lull between the waning of the medieval culture with its own art forms and worldview and the ascendancy of the modern one.

Most of the women discussed in previous chapters took up the pen at some time or the other. In what had come to be recognized by 1900 as their mother tongue, these women all wrote in Bengali though many of them had learnt Urdu at home. They had all been affected in varying degrees by the process of modernization which was accompanied by a simultaneous imbibement of indigenous culture (here termed **Bengalicization**), particularly manifest in the choice and use of language. The women were themselves products of the new age as well as one of its agents of change. They

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

wrote in the language of the new middle class for the middle class. They composed poems celebrating moonlight in a garden, or a mother's tenderness, or things longed for and unseen; wrote stories of domestic strife and joy, love and betrayal or an occasional historical romance; turned out an occasional novel and depicted the lives of great men and women. They expressed their views on the burning issues of the day through analyses of social problems, specially *purdah* and *aborodh*, female education, and the problem of Bengali Muslim identity. Like the Brahmo and Hindu women of the preceding decades, women discussed here produced a considerable bulk of writings which comprise a fascinating storehouse for the historical reconstruction of the period under review.

There have been a few studies on Muslim women's writings but they belong to the field of literary discourse.[1] To date there has not been any attempt at analyzing their works in the context of the emergence of the Muslim *bhadromohila*. For it was in the creative act of writing and publishing what was written, that she declared her social presence.

By the first decade of the twentieth century journals, periodicals and newspapers started to reach almost every middle class home. These along with the printing presses, provided a platform for women's creative activity. It is difficult for anyone standing at this far end of the twentieth century and studying the *bhadromohila* eighty years ago, to appreciate the courage required to give public expression to their thoughts and feelings through the printed word in a society where it was difficult to be a woman let alone a woman writer. It would be relevant in this regard to remember the constraints faced by women writers of nineteenth century England and

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[1]See Mujeer Uddin, *Banga Sahitye Muslim Mohila*, (Bengali), (Muslim Women in Bengali Literature) (Dhaka: Deedar Publishing House, 1967); Begum Jahan Ara, *Bangla Sahitye Lekhikader Abadan*, (Bengali), (Contribution of Women to Bengali Literature), (Dhaka: Muktodhara, 1987); Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manos O Bangla Sahitya*, (Dhaka: Muktodhara, 1964).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

America. As pointed out in a monumental study on the subject:

> For if contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority, they are able to do so only because their eighteenth and nineteenth century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture... only a full consideration of such problems can reveal the extraordinary strength of women's literary accomplishments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[2]

Women "who attempted the pen"[3] in nineteenth century England, America, or Bengal, had to deal with a social attitude that did not look upon the act of reading, not to speak of writing, with much favour. The novel-reading *adhunika*, it will be remembered, was ridiculed and censured by conservatives whenever the occasion arose (See Chap. V). Even Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, the most widely acclaimed novelist of the time, who was otherwise well-known for his sympathy for the oppressed lot of women in traditional Hindu society, found occasion to publish a derisive article on women's writings, albeit under his sister Anila's name. In this article titled "Narir Lekha" (1913), he discussed the works of 'Amodini Ghoshjaya', Anurupa Devi and Nirupama Devi, derisively referring to some of the female

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[2]Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic – The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 51.

[3]A phrase taken by Gilbert and Gubar from an eighteenth century poem by Anne Finch:

Alas a woman that attempts the pen
Such an intruder on the rights of men
Such a presumptuous creature is esteem'd
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.

The sentiment was echoed a hundred years later by Robert Southey who said "Literature is not the business of a woman's life, and cannot be." cited in ibid. pp.3-8.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

writers as "Mohila Saraswatis".[4] Sensitive female writers might have cringed at the novelist's ruthless dissection of their similes, metaphors and conceptual ambivalences. Sharat (as Anila Devi) rounded off the piece by relegating Anurupa's pretentious works as fit reading matter for a young child. Sharat himself had high literary standards, for both male or female writers, and he did add a word of praise for Nirupama. Moreover, he had consciously avoided the diatribe to be published in his own name. Nonetheless, one wonders how women attempting the pen reacted to this article. This much may be safely said, though, that if the constraints and criticism faced by women writers of the more advanced Hindu community were as severe as this, how much more difficult must have been the position of Muslim women embarking on creative activity.

But apparently, all this did not deter Bengali women from attempting the pen. Often early women's writings (e.g. Rokeya's in *Mohila* or *Nabanur*) would have the modifier "written by a Muslim *bhadromohila* [sic] of a respectable family" inscribed below the title. Nonetheless, women's writing found a nichè for itself and in 1929 *Saogat* even decided to bring out a "ladies' issue" containing thirty-two pieces.

The writings of the Muslim *bhadromohila* differed from their Hindu and Brahmo predecessors in the noticeable absence of autobiographical works, the *Atmacharit* and *Smriti Katha* so popular to the latter.[5] One notes the

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[4]Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay alias Anila Devi, "Narir Lekha", (Bengali), (Women's Writings), First pub. *Falgun*, 1319 BS; in *Sharat Rachanabali*, Tuli Kalam ed. (Calcutta: Tuli Kalam, 1989), p.889.

[5]For a full treatment of autobiographical writings among Hindu and Brahmo women, see Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991). Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds.) in the Introduction to their anthology *Women's Writing in India: 66 B.C. to the Present*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) have provided the most insightful analysis of women's writings in India, their depth, beauty and polemical traits, and the politics these writings themselves were subject to, in later periods.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

absence of Mankumari Basu, Rassunduri or Binodini's piece by piece reconstruction of their pasts. Perhaps by the 1920s the need for such an outlet had died. One thing the two groups of women shared in common though was their silence on the truly personal. Despite much spilt ink, both categories of writings did not allow a penetrating glance into the innermost recesses which housed personal needs, angry reactions, physical desire or inter-personal feelings.

Another common feature was the dominance of 'social' themes. In spite of the Brahmo or Hindu *bhadromohila*'s predilection for memoirs and the Muslim *bhadromohila*'s neglect of them, both managed to repress their innermost selves in favour of the social Self.

The Beginning

Though Muslim writers entered the domain of modern Bengali literature somewhat later, their entry was not very belated.[6] Mir Mosharraf Hossain's *Ratnabali* (1869) saw the light of day within a decade of Pearychand Mitra's *Alaler Ghorer Dulal* (1858). *Ratnabali* bore the caption 'Comic novel' but admittedly had few traits of one. *Bishad Sindhu* and Mir's semi autobiographical works were closer to the genre.

The first Muslim woman to write in modern prose was Bibi Taherunnessa whose essay in the form of a long letter "Bamagoner Rachona" appeared in the February-March issue of *Bamabodhini Patrika*, in 1865. Taherunnessa in her essay pleaded for women's education. Not much is known about her except that she was a student of Boda Girls' School in Calcutta. In its June issue of 1897 the *Bamabodhini Patrika* published a poem by another Muslim lady, Latifunnessa who had passed the examination of Campbell Medical School. The poem was titled "Bangiyo Muslim Mohilader Proti" (To the

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[6]See Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manos*, pp.190-200.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Muslim Ladies of Bengal).

However, the credit of writing the first full-length book in modern times goes to Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, the author of *Rupjalal.* The most famous literary figure in Faizun's time other than Mir was Qazem al Qureshi who wrote under the pen name Kaikobad. His *Ashrumala* (Garland of Tears) was written in 1894, and *Maha Shmashan* (The Great Cemetery) in 1896. Kaikobad followed by Mir Mosharraf were among the first to set the trend in favour of unadulterated Bengali prose for this was "the time when Muslims were not usually ready to read anything other than *do-bhasi* or bi-lingual *pũnthi* written in verse."[7] (Other than Perso-Urdu-Arabic works, that is.)

Faizunnessa was born into a zamindar family where Urdu was the language favoured for written discourse (as the deeds and documents of the family testify.) But she took pains to learn Bengali in which she composed her literary works. This phenomenon, i.e., the dilemma of Urdu and Bengali, in which one language perceived to be somehow more attuned to 'Islamic' culture than the other, was the source of a problematic pertaining to Bengali Muslim identity. The Muslim *bhadromohila* would later have quite a bit to say about this, but that is subject matter for another study.

Rupjalal, Faizunnessa's only extant literary work, was published from Dhaka in 1876 (she had written another book *Sangeet Lahari* which is not available any more). It may be recalled that in the same year Swarnakumari Devi's *Dipnirban* (Extinction of Light), probably the first Bengali novel written by a female writer[8], was published from Calcutta. Swarnakumari, Rabindranath's sister, had already evolved a full fledged modern, prose-

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[7]Sufia Ahmed, p.318.

[8]As already mentioned in the Introduction, this claim also goes to Hannah Catherine Mullens' "Phulmani O Karunar Bibaran" published in 1852.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

style in the proper narrative conventions of the day and had imbibed the entire gamut of *bhadro*, romantic-euphemistic ideology as well.

It is difficult to classify *Rupjalal* as it was a hybrid work composed in both medieval and modern literary conventions. Critics consider it to be a 'tale' or *upakhyan* — and it may be placed alongside other texts of the period in terms of style, form and content. Faizun eschewed the preceding *mishrobhasha* (mixed language) convention and composed her work in 'pure' Bengali.[9] Stylistically, it resembled Khondker Shamsuddin's *Uchit Shraban* (1860), an advice manual in poetry and prose. Ghulam Husain's *Harh Jwalani* (1864), a "domestic prose composition" and Sheikh Azimuddin's *Korir Mathai Buror Biye* (2nd ed., 1868), a prose-poem satire, and *Rupjalal* were similar works. Abdur Rahim's *Premlila* also belonged to the same time and type of literary endeavour.

Rupjalal provided a remarkably hybrid picture of an age in transition; of a sensibility poised between the medieval '*punthi*' and the modern prose. Most scholars refer to it as a '*kabya*' or long poem. The greater part of it was written in sing-song verse interspersed by passages written in prose. The book revolved around the romantic longing of Prince Jalal for Princess Rupbano. A host of characters were invoked - jinns, fairies, ogres, saints and Satan, gods and ordinary mortals. The sweep was epic and gave a flavour of the Islamic-Hindu syncretistic ethos of (rural) Bengal. The book (parts of which are considered semi-autobiographical) differed in tone and temper from the literary trend of the future *bhadromohila* who — fed on Bankim, Sharat, Tagore, Mir, Kazi Emdadul Huq, Shirazi, and other 'modern' writers — would not have allowed themselves the frankly sexual imagery and allusions found in *Rupjalal*.

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[9]See Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manos*, for a discussion of the transition from medieval to modern literary tradition and *mishro-bhasa* forms.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Faizun herself was not a full-fledged *bhadromohila* as such - she belonged to the old mould as much as the new. She was a *bhadromohila* in the sense Shirazi used the term in his *Bangiyo Musulman* (see Chap. I). Some of her ideas were modern, but her lifestyle was not. She of all women traversed to the public from the private every day (see Chap. II) but retained her invisibility by observing strict *purdah*. Faizun's was an age in which the liberal colonist's puritanic cultural creed had not been imbibed in full by the nascent *bhadrolok* in the Muslim community. Consequently, she could still express herself in a pre-reconstruction/pre-reformation mode. A *bhadromohila* of the 1920s would not have resorted to the frank sexuality expressed in the following stanzas:

What kind of lover are you, thirsty one
That you do not drink the nectar
Of the maiden, though she be new?
She burns with the fire of unrequited love
What wrong is there in drinking honey
From her who is your own ?[10]

Nor the following which showed more explicitly, woman's desire:

Deprived of the play
That transpires between man and wife,
The princess burns without a night of love-making.[11]

The later gentlewomen influenced by Victorian/Brahmo puritanism would be more euphemistic in expressing physical desire. But it would be wrong to banish Faizun to the medieval age, for in the same book one comes across passages written in the most 'modern' (i.e. Bankim-like) prose highlighted on occasion by Sanskrit verses.[12] For here was a woman who had admin-

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[10]Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, p.151.

[11]ibid. p.149.

[12]As for instance in pages 177-227 written in continuous prose. That

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

istered her own zamindari, set up a girls', school left her husband on account of polygamy, and refused the title of Begum for the non-gendered one of Nawab.

Azizunnessa was probably the first to publish in a Muslim-edited periodical viz. *Islam Pracharok*. In 1902 *Pracharok* published her poem '*Hamd: Ishwar Prashasti*' (Hymn: In Praise of God). She also translated 'The Hermit' by Archdeacon Parnell of Clogher into Bengali verse in 1884. She was more familiar with Urdu than Bengali (See Introduction above) according to the preface of her work *Sanyasi* (1906), where she also acknowledged with deep gratitude her debt to her mentor, Maulvi Merajuddin Ahmed. She was married to a zamindar, Hamidullah Khan, of Tetuliya in Khulna.

Khairunnessa (c.1870-1912), a resident of Sirajganj, wrote around the same time as Azizunnessa. Her essays appeared in *Nabanur*. In 1904 she published an essay "Amader Shikshar Antorai" and in 1905 a piece entitled "Swadesh Anurag" where she appealed to women to boycott foreign goods in support of the Swadeshi Movement. Her *Satir Pati Bhakti* was a manual for women laying down the duties of a good wife. In the introduction to the sixty-eight page booklet, Khairunnessa wrote: "I am an ordinary Muslim *mohila* [sic] who has not written a book before. But when I was a teacher at the local girl's school, I wrote occasional pieces for a newspaper."[13] Khairun's writing actually bore signs of sufficient learning, culture and intelligence, as Mansuruddin observed:

> She has written about a husband-wife relationship and raising children, after much study. Though her views may appear at times conservative due to the environment she lived in, her basic argu-

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Faizun knew Sanskrit is evident from the *shloka* on pp. 220, 222.

[13]Cited in Muhammad Mansuruddin, *Bangla Sahitye Muslim Sadhana*, 3rd ed., (Bengali) (Muslim Cultivation of Bengali Literature), (Dhaka: Ratan Publishers, 1981), pp.197-198.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> ments would benefit liberals too... She opined that female backwardness was the root of societal decline; a household in which women are not happy will never prosper.[14]

Abdul Hakim Vikrampuri writing for *Saogat* in 1926 briefly reviewed Muslim women's writings and referred to Khairunnessa:

> The late Khairunnessa Khatun Saheba had written a women's book titled 'Satir Pati Bhakti'. She was the headmistress of Hossainpur Balika Bidyalay in Sirajganj. The popularity of her book may be gauged from the fact that it has gone into its fourth edition.[15]

Khairunnessa was probably the first of early women writers to formulate her ideas on social and political issues at some length. From the scanty evidence available it seems a few other women also wrote didactic manuals, e.g. S. K. Khatun's *Swami Sohagini* (Husband's Beloved, pp. 146) an "advice manual for Muslim women" published from Noakhali in 1914.

Sohifa Bano (c.1850-1926), another early female writer, hailed from Sylhet and was a sister of the famous folk-lyricist Hasan Raja. She pursued a quiet literary career in the semi-rural mofussil atmosphere far from the din and clamour of Dhaka and Calcutta.

Twentieth Century Social Criticism

Before Faizunnessa's work was discovered and drew the attention of literary critics, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein was usually hailed as the first Muslim female writer of modern times. Rokeya started her literary career in 1901 when her essay "Pipasa" appeared in *Nabaprabha*. Her next piece 'Alankar na Badge of slavery' created quite a stir. It was published in the

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[14]ibid., p.198

[15]Muhammad Abdul Hakim Vikrampuri, "Banga Sahitye Musulman Mohila", (Bengali) (Muslim Women in Bengali Literature), *Saogat*, Bhadra 1333 BS, 4:3, 173.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

journal *Mohila* (1310 BS) edited by Girish Chandra Sen from Calcutta. There was almost no arena of literature where Rokeya's pen did not venture - poetry, short-story, satire, essay, novel or fantasy. Writing in the age of Tagore, what her work lacked in literary and aesthetic calibre, it compensated by wit, clarity and dedication to the women's cause. In this section a few selected passages from Rokeya's writings are presented to illustrate the themes being discussed here: the *bhadrolok* and the *bhadro* world, the formulation of her feminist theory and domestic ideology. (For the birth of the 'new woman' see Chapter VII.)

To begin with, let us consider Rokeya's satirical poem 'Appeal' (1922), written at a moment when the bhadrolok were alarmed lest the British government recall their titles (Khan Bahadur, Rai Bahadur etc.), in the wake of the anti-government nationalist activities. Here was Rokeya at her witty, sarcastic best. In the poem the 'Bengali Bhadrolok' have gathered round to draw up an appeal to the government not to decree a cancellation of their titles:

> Some enjoy vast estates most
> And some weighty titles boast
> O' let us all gather round
> And appeal to the exalted crown-
> That 'titles' alas, we cannot live without...
> Some British paper has decreed
> 'Cut the titles, off with the tails
> Of all the stupefied *bhadro* males of Bengal.
> That is what they deserve, no doubt.[16]

Written at a particular political moment, this was a much discussed poem at the time of its publication. Rokeya satirized the 'moderate' stand taken

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[16]R. S. Hossein, "Appeal", *Sadhana*, Falgun 1328 B.S., in *RR*, p.568 (trans. mine).

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

by '*bhadrolok* politicians' at a critical juncture in Bengali history. The poem would have made any titled *bhadrolok* cringe. Its portrayal of their reaction to the proposition made by an "irate white [British] newspaper" according to which "moderates who are keeping silent ought to be deprived of their titles", was unflattering, even ludicrous. The paper had indicated those Indians who were not taking a sufficiently pro-British stand in the wake of nationalist, anti-colonial movements in the critical years 1920-1922. And Rokeya was indicting those very Indians for their positions of collaboration and convenience evinced by their adhesion to titles (and favours) bestowed by the British. This was the section which believed in 'silence' and to illustrate what she thought of those who abided by laws ordained by the colonial government, she made them say in the same poem:

> Come let us all declare
> We have never violated the law.
> Who dare preach sedition
> Let him perish!
> Rebels, writers, dreamers of Swaraj
> Hear us, waste not the precious gift of life.[17]

Rokeya identified this class - the landed, the titled, and the "civilized but under-nourished". The last is a bit difficult to interpret, but she probably meant the educated, urbanized class whose purses were not swelled by revenue from land, or high government office. Which leaves the residual category of the worse off *bhadrolok*, of course.

"Appeal" and "Niriha Bangali" (1904) were the two pieces where Rokeya directly addressed the prevalent liberal male (i.e. *bhadro*) ideology. Anyone who is lulled into thinking Rokeya was a simple liberal (which she was part of the time as and when it suited her, as she could be somewhat orthodox too if the occasion arose, or conversely a radical) will have to do some re-

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[17]ibid. p.569.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

thinking when confronted with her harsh critique of liberal ideology as exemplified by the Bengali *bhadrolok*. It would be a mistake to think she was sliding into a conservative, anti-liberal stand. No, her criticism of orthodoxy was just as merciless; but her thought and vision could penetrate the patriarchal loopholes in liberalism and go beyond it to times not yet born.

"Niriha Bangali" (meaning the helpless, simple Bengalee, who played it safe) was Rokeya's diatribe against the educated, middle class and the unattractive qualities of that class. Ambition without the desire to work hard, dependence, fondness for words rather than action, cowardice and a predilection for romanticism, - were all ingredients of the *Niriha* Bangali. Rokeya kept adding one hilarious characteristic after another:

> We are adept at one trade - selling degrees. The seller is called 'groom' and the buyer is called 'father-in law'. For it is easier to live off the old fool of a father in-law than to earn one's living... And while on the subject...we have come to the conclusion that it is easier to engage in brain-culture than agriculture.[18]

What was quite as significant was a footnote added to "Niriha Bangali", written in the wake of the Swadeshi Movement. Rokeya indulged in one of her rare moments of appreciation for the Bengali race in what was taken to be an oblique tribute to the *Swadeshis*:

> Happily for us recent events prove Bengalees are not effeminate. Who would have thought matters would improve thus in five years, thanks to the Almighty (*Jagadishwar*) we are now 'Courageous Bengalees'.[19]

Rokeya's views on Swadeshi was also evident in the poem *Nirupam Bir*

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[18]R. S. Hossein, *R.R.*, p.33.

[19]ibid, p.35.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

(Peerless Warrior) which she composed to eulogize the revolutionary Kanailal who had been sentenced to death by hanging for his part in the anti-British activities following the partition of Bengal:

> The thankless world may forget
> The name of Kanailal the bold,
> But in the heart of Bharat his memory remains
> Etched in letters of gold.[20]

Rokeya's anti-colonial allegory "Muktiphal" (The Fruit of Liberty) was serialized a year before "Appeal", in *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika.* In "Muktiphal" Rokeya addressed the plight of India's society and polity on a wider and more ambitious canvas - colonization. The wit of "Appeal" was missing in this more grim work. The failure of the bourgeois, liberal and centrist (moderate) stand of politicians in India's anti colonial struggle was portrayed as well their failure to unite (as evinced by the Congress split in 1917), but the theme now became subsidiary in the context of the patriots' courageous and gigantic task of freeing the motherland (by plucking the Fruit of Liberty).

It was not pleasurable or lilting reading (which most of her works were not, laden as they were with ideological message), but it recorded a *bhadromohila*'s exposition of the economic and cultural havoc wrought by colonization, its dehumanizing consequences and the failure of the political leaders to tackle it. The various response and strategies of the colonized - from collaboration to resistance were depicted in allegorical terms. The collaborators, needless to say, came from the same section of the *bhadrolok* class who had drawn up the 'Appeal' to the government, described above. Those who resisted were the true sons and *daughters* of the soil - the patriots who laid aside self-interest and set out on a perilous journey to

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[20] ibid., pp. 570-571.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

procure the fruits from the mythical tree of liberty which would cure their mother from her fatal disease. Colonization and the consequent bondage by a foreign power, was thus viewed as a debilitating disease which drained the vital strength from a nation's society, economy and polity.

The allegory has always been a popular genre with writers who wished to criticize a regime or system but had to resort to some form of subversive camouflage (e.g., Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, or Lewis Carrol's *Alice in Wonderland*). In a population trying to survive and struggle under a colonial regime, its use was very understandable. It is significant in this respect that Rokeya added the epithet 'A fairy-tale' under the title *Muktiphal* just as she passed Sultana's vision off as a "dream" in *Sultana's Dream*.

But Rokeya was not one to see problems of empire, colony or class in isolation from the problem of patriarchy. "Muktiphal" ends where Kangalini's two daughters, newly awakened, get ready to set out for the perilous quest for the fruits of the tree of liberty. The previous quests had failed, one by one. None of them had women in their ranks. Now Srimati and Suniti were getting ready to join in the journey (even the names Rokeya chose were illustrative of her syncretic, pan-Indian, cultural convictions - which made up *one* of her identities).

The pieces discussed above were written in a form that *bhadromohila* were not disposed to favour - satire. In this Rokeya was unique among the women of her generation and the Brahmo women who preceded her. In their caustic wit and sarcasm, Rokeya's poems and allegories transgressed the *bhadromohila* creed, as her fiction also was going to do. Her biting sarcasm was also evident in a rejoinder to Muhammad Abdul Hakim Vikrampuri's review of Muslim women writers in *Saogat*. Vikrampuri's piece was somewhat ill-starred because it evoked sharp responses from two contemporary women writers who did not like the manner in which Vikrampuri had compiled his list. Rokeya and Mrs M. Rahman did not agree with Vikrampuri on

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

many points and exposed some gross mistakes in his essay, in their witty rejoinders "Rang O Sona" and "Bhul Bhanga" published in the Ashwin issue of *Saogat.*

Though Rokeya's feminist theory was woven into most of her writings, there were some pieces exclusively concerned with problems of patriarchy. In this category fall "Stree Jatir Abanati" (1905), "Ardhangi" (1905) and "Narir Adhikar", her last work written in 1932 and published posthumously. In "Stree Jatir Abanati" her feminist message which was revolutionary in the context of those times, rang out loud and clear:

> We shall do what is required to attain equality with men. If that involves earning an independent livelihood so be it. If necessary we shall be lady-clerks (sic), lady magistrates, or lady judges...If we cannot get employment with the Raj, we shall take to agriculture. Why do we weep because grooms are hard to find in India? Educate your daughters and let them earn their own livelihood.[21]

In the remarkable fantasy *Sultana's Dream,* which she wrote in flawless English, Rokeya gave full rein to her imagination by depicting 'LadyLand', a realm where gender roles were reversed and women assumed the public role while men stayed indoors. It is now hailed as a 'radical' piece of feminist writing though Rokeya herself was not a radical all of the time. But if one is to look for the radical in Rokeya one would have to look at her early feminist essays as well as her fiction where she freely resorted to subversion of existing ideologies.

Rokeya's only novel, *Padmarag* (1924), was a narration of life in Tarini Bhavan, a sanctuary where women of all creeds have found refuge and live a life of dignity. 'Tarini Bhavan' was the utopia which many feminists dream of to this day.[22] The contemporary periodical *Samyabadi* reviewed

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[21] R. S. Hossein, *R.R.,* p.29-30.

[22] *Padmarag* is discussed in Chap. VII. Rokeya's feminist thought has

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Padmarag and praised the author's vision, specially the harmony between Hindu, Muslim, Brahmo and Christian depicted by her.[23] The editor requested "every man and woman" to read the book.

Several of Rokeya's writings were concerned with the role of women in the domestic sphere - the family with women as the guardian of this other, real-life 'sanctuary'. In "Ardhangi" Rokeya illustrated the stunning breadth and clarity of her feminist theory; she set down in clear terms that women all over the world were subject to gender oppression. She had no illusions, in the ultimate analysis, about women of the 'civilized' colonizing race i.e. the British as the following passage illustrates:

> Though the Christian community has provided for female education, a woman does not possess full rights. Her mind is still enslaved... When the husband is immersed in debt, the wife is busy trying on her new bonnet [sic] because she has been trained to believe she is the personification of poetry; so she loves to grace the home as a poem incarnate. How can she comprehend matters like debt?[24]

In her analogy between the Bengali and English housewife Rokeya was making her universal feminist formulation. No patriarchal culture was spared, as her reading of the Ram-Sita legend proved:

> Sita Devi is held up as a model woman. Sita was not a *purdanashin* - she was Ram's *ardhangi*, lover, comrade. And he was noble, pious and loving. But his treatment of Sita was like that of a boy towards his pet toy...[25]

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been discussed by Muhammad Shamsul Alam, Motaher Hossain Sufi, Morshed Shafiul Hasan, Tahmina Alam, and others. See Bibliography for the details.

[23]Book Review of 'Padmarag' in *Samyabadi*, Falgun 1331 BS, cited in Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Banglar Samoyik Patra 1831-1930*, p.389.

[24]Mrs R. S. Hossein, "Ardhangi", *Nabanur*, (Ashwin 1311 BS), 2:5, 284

[25]ibid., p.282.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Rokeya did not spare the Muslim community either, but here her attacks were more guarded (she glorified the days of pristine Islam and lamented the distortion of scriptural injunctions in the present day).[26] But ensconced within her obeisance to scriptural authority in "Ardhangi" was a subversive passage often overlooked by critics, where Rokeya questioned the premise that "woman is half of a man" as laid down in Islamic ideology.[27] This was a common feature in most women who took up the task of social criticism - patriarchal structures were censured overtly by a negative portrayal of *other* societies and *covertly* by an attack on one's own. Rokeya clearly wished to establish that the disparity in the mental levels of husband and wife, considered particularly harmful by the new domestic ideology also which emphasized companionship, was not a problem in Hindu, Muslim or Christian cultures alone, but all over.

In "Griha" (home) Rokeya illustrated that although a woman may live in a household and expend most of the labour required for its upkeep, the home does not belong to her in actuality.

Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Rokeya's disciple, grew up in a family which had taken to western, liberal education and government employment very early on and had crusaded for women's rights. Her first work *Punyomoyee* was written when she was only ten and published in 1925 when she was only seventeen. It contained short biographies of eight great women of the Muslim world who served as role models. Among them were: the mystic Rabeya, the Prophet's daughter Fatema and his wives Ayesha and Khadija. *Begum Mahal* was another biographical work by Shamsunnahar - it recorded

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[26]ibid. p.287.

[27]ibid. p. 288. Also see Sonia Nishat Amin, " Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein: Tar Lorhaier Bibhinna Dik", (Bengali),(Rokeya S. Hossein: Various Aspects of her Struggle), in *Samaj Nirikshan*, Nov 1988, Feb. 1989 pp.84-92 and 108-120, for a tentative analysis of *apparent* contradictions and recantations in Rokeya's texts.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

the lives of great Pathan and Mughal women of medieval India. But Shamsunnahar's most well-known book was *Rokeya Jibani*, the first biography of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, her mentor and comrade in the crusade for women's education. It was published from Calcutta in 1937. In what remains to this day an authentic biography of Rokeya, Shamsunnahar paid tribute to the pioneer of the women's awakening in Bengal. Shamsunnahar was primarily an educationist and many of her writings were concerned with the various aspects of education in Bengal (viz. "Shishu Shiksha", "Muslim Bonge Stree Shiksha" etc.). She wrote a manual on nursing for women in Bengali titled "Nurse".

Razia Khatun Chaudhurani (1907-1934) was another major social critic. She had a brief span of life, but she made a name as essayist, poet and short-story writer. Being married to a politician, Ashraf Ali Chowdhury, Razia was perhaps one of the few female writers who had an opportunity to come very close to the politics of the time - the Swadeshi Andolan, Khilafat Movement, and the Civil Disobedience Movement. Razia's political views were reflected in her short story "Sramik".

All the essays save one, which have been collected in her collected works bore the word 'women' in the title. They dealt with the education of Muslim women, women's role in the home and outside; *purdah* and its perversion *aborodh*, the status of women in Islam, and motherhood. In "Samaje o Grihe Narir Sthan", Razia said:

> For so long Muslim women suffered all oppression in silence. Today a few are getting education and their eyes have opened... There are societies for prevention of cruelty to animals, the government has laws to hang murderers and yet no one turns a glance in this direction.[28]

[28]Razia Khatun, *Saogat*, Bhadro 1334 BS, 5:3, 273.

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Many of the *bhadromohila* displayed striking clarity in their critical formulation of extant gender relations. For instance Razia exposed the hypocrisy innate in the patriarchal concept of *Satitva* (Chastity):

> This word 'Sati' is an illusion. It is applied at random to women, but there is no equivalent word for men, in Bengali, or even in English - the 'highly civilized' language. 'Satitva' or Chastity and similar jargon have been invented solely for women it seems. Fie on men. Why is it that a man never loses his chastity in the same manner as a woman is said to lose it?[29]

Here was a mind which apprehended a discussion of issues which were to emerge fifty years after her death. At the same time other passages in her works betrayed a supercilious attitude regarding her own religion which may have subscribed to the ethos of growing Muslim separatism of the day. These discrepancies just went to show that the *bhadromohila* was not a monolithic entity and subscribed to a wide range of attitudes.

Mrs M. Rahman (who wrote under this name) was more original and vocal as a social critic than the others and can be compared with Rokeya. She wrote regularly for Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Dhumketu*, published from Calcutta (though short-lived, it was a popular and progressive periodical of the time). Like many writers of the time Mrs Rahman distinguished between *purdah* (modesty in dress and behaviour) and *aborodh* (a patriarchal distortion of the former) which banished women behind the *andarmahal*. This was a leitmotif in the writings of the first half of the twentieth century and recurred often enough to suggest that the *purdah/aborodh* formulation was an intrinsic part of the mental makeup of the typical *bhadromohila*. But Mrs Rahman's features in *Sandhya Pradeep* (the column in *Dhumketu* reserved for discussion of women's issues) were regularly bold in their denouncement of patriarchal institutions.

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[29]Razia Khatun Chaudhurani, ibid.

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All the women who took up the pen constructed a golden age of Islam in the past when women enjoyed all rights granted them in their religion. Most women glorified women's status in Islam and Razia Khatun went to the extent of stating that it was the only religion that granted women rights and hence superior to Christianity or Hinduism etc. Here she fell short of the secularism Rokeya displayed in her famous attack on religious books. Rokeya did not go into any specification, and thereby avoided the pitfall of ethnocentricism.[30]

In real life many of the women above wore the *burqa*. Some discarded it after marriage and Rokeya donned it late in life. When asked about this, she is said to have replied that she would resort to any measure to preserve her school. Thus, the possibility of 'Strategy' as an explanatory factor for the puritan ethic of the *bhadromohila* writers in their art as well as reality cannot be ruled out.

Fiction: Domesticity and Love

Nurunnessa Khatun, the writer of *Swapnadrishta* (published in 1923), is taken to be the first female Muslim novelist.[31] Although Rokeya's *Padmarag* was written much earlier, it was not published until 1925.

Among the women in this generation of writers, Nurunnessa was probably the most prolific as a fiction writer. She was born into a *sharif* family in Murshidabad district; her father was in government employment and the family, reasonably enlightened, placed no obstacles in the path of her quiet

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[30]Rokeya's well-known passage on the world's major religious texts being the creations of men, in "Amader Abanoti", in *Nabanur*, was ejected when the essay appeared in book form later, on the grounds that it might be too radical.

[31]A 94-page social novel *Zobeda* was published from Calcutta in 1921. This would have made its writer S. F. Khatun the first female (Muslim) novelist. See Ali Ahmed, p.390. I have not seen a copy of *Zobeda*.

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pursuit of education which was conducted within the *andarmahal.* In the preface to her first novel *Swapnadrishta* she said:

> I have never had the experience of sitting on a school bench. Neither have I ever sat in front of a tutor with open book. To quench my own thirst and curiosity I taught myself some ABCs and tinkered around with a few books on my own.[32]

It would seem that Nurunnessa must have taught herself very well as she made quite a name for herself in the world of writing. She was married in 1912 to a *mokhtar* (law-practitioner) from Serampore in Hughly, who was liberal in his views and encouraged her literary activities. Nurunnessa's works include two 'domestic' novels, one historical novel, three novellas and several essays. She was awarded the titles of *Bidyabinodini* (dates not available) and *Sahitya Saraswati* by the Nikhil Bharat Sahitya Sangha (and Bangiyo Sahitya Sammelon) for her contribution in the field of literature. (See Chap. VII for a fuller discussion).

Mamlukul Fatema Khanam (1894-1957) was younger than Nurunnessa by two years. Her father was an employee in the Railway Department. She too was educated at home; but unlike many others of her time Fatema Khanam worked as a teacher in Calcutta (Sakhawat Memorial) and Dhaka (Posta Girls' School) to support herself. Married into an orthodox family, she felt compelled to leave her husband in Manikganj and moved to Dhaka with her children where she eked out an existence on her own. She was an avid reader and Sharatchandra and Rabindranath were her favourite writers - though Bankim's attitude she sometimes considered prejudiced against Muslims. Only seven of her short-stories survive today in the form of a slim reprint *Saptarshi* (1964), and several letters written to Abul Fazal, young writer of the Dhaka scene and editor of the short-lived literary

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[32]Nurunnessa Khatun Bidyabinodini, "Swapnadrishta", *NG*, preface, p.2

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journal *Tarun-Patro*. Abul Fazl recorded his great regard for this enlightened and affectionate lady, clad always in a white sari, garb of elderly women and widows in Bengal, whose house had often served as a meeting-place for literary sessions of Dhaka's up and coming younger, western educated generation. Fazl considered Fatema Khanam to be one of Rokeya's lesser known co-workers.

Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun (1901-1921) must be placed in the same category of writers. She was born into a wealthy and enlightened family of Faridpur district in East Bengal. Her brother Mujibur Rahman was among one of the first Bengali Muslims to enter the Indian Civil Service. Akhtar was married in 1913 to the son of a respectable family in Noakhali, but the marriage was probably incompatible. The prospect of a daughter in law immersed in books or writing, was not looked upon with favour in her in-law's house. But Akhtar continued writing in secret. Her writings were locked away in a trunk (which reminds one of Emily Dickinson's habit of stowing away her day's work in a chest), till Nazrul Islam, a famous poet by then and a house-guest at their estate in Noakhali, discovered that she wrote. He encouraged the budding writer and her works were published in *Naoroze* first under a pseudonym and later in her own name, in *Saogat*. Akhtar Mahal's prose was chaste and expressive, but her career was cut short by her early death. Only two brief social essays have survived: "Narir Abhijog" and "Shishupalon".[33]

Like Victorian and Brahmo writers before them, Muslim *bhadromohila* produced fiction that centred around domesticity and love (or its absence). But the latter's works lacked the intricate plots and many-layered, introspective, psychological atmosphere of the former. Neither Nurunessa, nor Rokeya, Akhtar mahal, Razia Khatun or any of the others ever used the

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[33] Her fiction will be discussed in Chap. VII.

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first person narrative so popular among Victorian and even Brahmo women novelists. Though it was possible to conceal oneself even in the first person narrative form, the Muslim *mohila*'s avoidance of the voice lent a peculiarly distant and detached quality to their writings which could not therefore burst into a convincing similitude of real life. It emphasized their closure on their selves when wielding the pen, specially in fiction where one trod the realms of passion, desire, love etc. This situation must have arisen out of the different material circumstances (and hence social reality) of the different categories of writers - Victorian, Brahmo and Muslim. Phenomena - ranging from conventional courtships, matrimonial manoeuvres, and domestic situations, to travels undertaken by the single heroine in distant lands in the capacity of governess or teacher, and sojourns in neo-gothic mansions by lonely women trapped in romantic-mysterious-emotional and spatial labyrinths - were facets of British life and culture, providing rich material for fiction. But these were not the life circumstances of Muslim *bhadromohila* whose writings were bound to reflect the lack of such high drama in their lives. What drama there existed (the Muslim community must have had its share of intrigue, illicit love, captivity, passion and adventure) seemed to be a male preserve. Women, who were already anxious in that they had dared to break social norms in "attempting the pen", were content, perhaps cautious to confine themselves to 'tame', legitimate i.e. domestic themes. Romance and adventure were exorcised away to 'historical novels' such as Nurunessa's *Janaki Bai*. Such avoidance in women's writings reviewed here, must have been due partly to the material reality and partly no doubt to the impetus inherent in *reforming* societies to instruct rather than entertain.

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Poetry: The Romantic Tradition

Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua (1906-1977) and Sufia Kamal (b. 1911) lived in the age of Tagore and Nazrul. They were the major poets to emerge from the ranks of the Muslim *bhadromohila*. Their poetry was born of the romantic tradition of that age.[34] A recent biographer of Mahmuda notes:

> From 1900 onwards a spate of literary journals edited by Muslims were inspired by the spirit of the Bengal Renaissance, i.e. in their rational outlook, contemporaneity, and aesthetic approach to art. The Bengali Muslim poetical tradition starting with Nazrul built upon this liberal-aesthetic tradition.[35]

This was the environment in which Mahmuda and Sufia took up their pens.

Mahmuda Khatun was born into an enlightened family where women cultivated the arts in the quiet domesticity of the *andarmahal*. Her mother Rahatunnesa was fond of books and music. "But the most profound influence on her life was that of her great-grandmother. This lady knew Bengali, Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Nagari."[36] In an unpublished memoir, Mahmuda recollected her deep regard for this lady:

> My great-grandmother had kindled the love for poetry within me. With the fall of dusk she would cast her spell of fairy tales over me...I started to write poetry somewhere around then... Kaikobad's *Ashrumala* and my tutor's *Anowara* reached our bookshelf. I was enchanted by Kaikobad's poetry.[37]

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[34]For an evaluation of Mahmuda's works from a literary point of view, see Begum Akter Kamal's biography, *Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua*, (Bengali) (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1987). Here I am evaluating them mainly in their historical context.

[35]ibid. p.13

[36]Begum Akter Kamal, ibid. p.15.

[37]Mahmuda Khatun, unpublished memoir, cited by Akter Kamal, ibid. pp. 16-17.

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Mahmuda's early education started at home but she did attend a school upto the 6th class. Her father Khan Bahadur Muhammad Suleiman was a Divisional School Inspector, and had studied at Presidency College. When he was posted in Rajshahi, she attended the local missionary school for a time and was tutored at home by Najibar Rahman, the famous novelist. She had wanted to study medicine but owing to circumstances could not; but she procured a diploma in Hygiene in 1928 and also received the Lady Carmichael Diploma in Cooking. Mahmuda has a slightly different account of her life in *purdah*:

> Muslim society observed strict purdah - my aunts wore 'burqa' and had to be covered with a mosquito net if the rare event of having to travel ever arose. Even I was put in purdah at the age of twelve and taken out of school. But the world outside was so irresistible that I would ramble in the garden whenever I could.[38]

Mahmuda published three volumes of poetry: *Posharini* (1931), *Mon O Mrittika* (1960), and *Aranyer Sur* (1963). Her life was devoted entirely to the Muse of literature — for though married once, she was estranged and never had to raise a family. She graced many literary conventions and often delivered the presidential addresses at these without a *burqa*, a rare feat for a Muslim woman of the times.

Mahmuda had the good fortune to come into contact with two of the greatest figures of the Bengal Renaissance: Sharatchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore. The most memorable public occasion for Mahmuda must have been the civic reception accorded to novelist Sharat Chatterjee at Albert Hall of Calcutta in 1936, where she read a paper. A secular outlook and emphasis on communal harmony were intrinsic traits of Mahmuda's character and literary work throughout her life. The budding poet from the Muslim *andarmahal* once met Rabindranath and the latter was

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[38]ibid., p.20.

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very pleased, Mahmuda records, at the 'emergence' of a Muslim lady. She reminisced about the meeting which took place in Jorasanko:

> I watched with wonder... he seemed to radiate light... He chatted with us for a while and then said: 'I am struck with wonder that you have been able to cross the barrier of purdah. See... just as plants cannot grow without sun and air, human beings cannot bloom without air and light. The lotus has to grow out of the mud towards light in order to reach full bloom.[39]

Mahmuda also wrote essays. Her "Adhunika" was an essay on the modern woman, portrayed positively. She was perhaps the only woman to write on literary criticism thus reviewing the art she and others were creating.

With regard to poetics she believed that a poet's historical environment had direct bearing on his/her work. Her allegiance to the style forged by Tagore and her awareness of contemporary literary traditions are evident in the following extract from an essay titled "Bangabhasha" (the Bengali language):

> The ease and facility of Buddhadev Basu's language is more charming than Bankim's... Rabi babu's great creation Sesher Kavita is written in Birbali style and is as such popular. But this medium is more suited to novels and blank verse. For poetry one needs the language of Rabindranath's poetry.[40]

Sufia Kamal, the youngest of the generation of writers discussed here, was born into a zamindar's family in Barisal where Urdu was the language spoken and girls observed strict purdah and did not attend school. As a child, she probably never dreamed that she would one day be known as a poet, writing in Bengali at that, and a social worker. She started her literary life with much trepidation. She was married to Nehal Hossain and

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[39] Mahmuda Khatun, unpublished memoir, cited in ibid, pp.25-26.

[40] Mamuda Kahatun Siddiqua, "Banga Bhasa", cited in ibid., p.54.

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later widowed. For a while she took up a job in Calcutta and raised her family. Subsequently she got married to Mr Kamal. Although she started writing in the 1930's, her participation in the process of transformation that produced the Muslim *bhadromohila* was similar to that of Mahmuda Khatun's. After a full personal and public life as wife and mother, poet and head of the major women's organization in Bangladesh, Sufia Kamal is revered today as a conscientious voice of society, vigilant in upholding human rights in general and women's rights in particular.

Mahmuda Khatun and Sufia Kamal belonged to the first generation of female poets in the modern Muslim community. They followed the poetic tradition created by their predecessors like Kamini Ray (1864-1933), Mankumari Basu (1863-1943), Priyamvada Devi (1871-1934) and Lajjavati Basu (1873-1942). In poetic style more than anything the Hindu and Muslim *bhadromohila* were closest to each other — it was here that the two cultural streams blended into one. Some motifs may have differed, e.g., Sufia would have welcomed the Eid (the major festival of the Muslims) and Kamini would have referred to the Durgapuja (the major festival of the Hindus) or the former would have used *tasleem* in place of *namshkar*. But in style, sentiment, use of imagery and themes chosen, there was much convergence.

Journalism

While some of the *bhadromohila* were engaged in reconstructing the world through poetry, a few were devoting their time and energy to the publication and editing of journals. Muslim women's involvement with journals dates back to the nineteenth century when Karimunnessa Khanam patronized the publication of the progressive periodical *Ahmadi*. Faizunnessa too was a patron of the more conservative *Islam Pracharak*. However, in the field of journalism, Brahmo/Hindu and north Indian Muslim women scored greater success than did the Muslim *bhadromohila*. The former had flouri-

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shing journals, such as *Bamabodhini Patrika, Mahila, Abalabandhab, Khatun, Tahzibun Niswan, Pardanashin* and *Ismat*, brought out by and for women from the middle of the nineteenth century. Muslim Bengal could not boast of such journals — most of its efforts i.e. *Annessa, Ruprekha, Bulbul* or *Nari Shakti*, were short-lived. However, in the few endeavours that were undertaken, Chittagong seemed to have taken the lead in female journalism in those decades. Two of the periodicals edited by women were published from that city, and the editor of the third, Shamsunnahar, grew up there.

The first journal to be edited by a Muslim woman was *Annessa* (meaning "The women" in Arabic), published from Chittagong in 1921. Very little is known about its editor Begum Sofia Khatun and copies of the journal are rare. Brojendranath has an entry on *Annessa* in his monograph on journals edited by Bengali women in which he says: "The welfare of women was the chief aim of the journal."[41]

Suniti was also published from Chittagong in 1916 as a weekly (later bi-weekly). Sometime in the 1920s the editorship of the journal was taken over jointly by Khan Bahadur Mohammad Anwarul Azim M.A. (Cantab) and Begum Tohfatunnessa Azim, his wife. The Jaishtha 18 (1334 BS) issue of *Suniti* bore the names of both Anwarul Azim and Tohfatunnessa Azim on the title page. Tohfatunnessa (c.1916-1982), who had been educated at home, was also an avid social worker among rural women and later served as a parliamentarian in the then East Pakistan.

Jahanara Chowdhury edited the annual *Ruprekha* from Calcutta in 1932. The next year the name was changed to *Varshabani* (The Year's Message).

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[41]Brajendranath Bandopadhay, *Samoyikpatro Sampadone Banganari*, (Bengali) (Journals edited by Bengali Women), (Calcutta: Viswabharati Granthalay, 1950), p.15. Mustafa Nurul Islam gives one extract from *Annessa* in his book, from the 7th issue, 1921, of the journal. The extract is form 'Narir Adhikar' (Women's Rights) by Sofia Khatun. It is a negative view on women's demand for the vote.

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Brajendranath lists *Ruprekha* in a footnote, and S.H. Zaidi in his book *Position of Women under Islam* has an appendix of notable Muslim women with a photograph of Jahanara Chowdhury with the caption '*Editor of Ruprekha*' beneath. Jahanara was a very colourful personality who studied and lived in Calcutta. Reputed to be quite a beauty, she was married to a wealthy man, but, it is believed, total fulfilment in domestic life was not her lot. She devoted herself to patronage of art and culture.

In 1933 Shamsunnahar Mahmud and her brother Habibullah Bahar jointly launched *Bulbul* from Calcutta. Initially this literary journal came out thrice a year but in 1936 it was "transformed into a high standard monthly".[42] *Bulbul* continued till 1939. Its stance was in the best liberal standards of the day and Nazrul Islam himself welcomed its publication. Shamsunnahar was a regular contributor. As a female editor she set the trend.

Literary Activities: A Space for Women

Writing was one of the main areas in which women first made an entry. Women wrote and published before they ever went to schools. As mentioned in the previous section, the nineteenth century saw the launching of full scale journals for women such as *Masik Patrika* (1854), *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1863), *Abalabandhab* (1878), *Mahila-Bandhab* (1887), *Mahila* (1897) and *Antahpur* (1898), where Hindu and Brahmo women in the main, expressed themselves. A few Muslim women, long before girls started to step out of the *andar* on a large scale, contributed to some of these journals.

It was from 1900 onwards that Muslim women started to write regularly and on a larger scale in the numerous journals that were brought out in Calcutta and the various mofussil towns. In the field of creative literature, too, Brahmo and Hindu women took the lead. When Swarnakumari published

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[42]Brajendranath Bandopadhay, ibid, p.21

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her full-fledged novels, Faizunnessa was turning out her half *punthi* half prose *Rupjalal.* It was in the 1920s that Nurunessa emerged as the first notable female writer.

As the *bhadromohila* ideal gained ground, women created for themselves (or women were granted) a space in the public platform of the press through their literary activities. But as grounds were gained, so were they lost. Women were given the right to take up the pen and discourse on respectable (i.e., *bhadro*) issues. But this very respectability meant they now had to eschew an earlier frankness and freedom evident in Faizunnessa's work. Perhaps for this reason, the passionate gave way to the romantic and the *bhadromohila's* writings seldom verged upon the truly deeper and turbulent layers of the human condition.

This was not the only code that bound them. It would be pertinent at this point to draw once again upon the survey of women's writing (in the west) during the last 250 years by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Writing about women wielding the pen in male dominated cultures, they have developed a theory of female circumvention and adjustment to the constraints faced by a materially and culturally disadvantaged group:

> Women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal and obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning.[43]

Bengali women writers did not have an attic; but they certainly had their little niches in the *andarmahal/antahpur.* Akhtar Mahal's trunk (where she secretly stored her meagre crop of writings) cannot fail to evoke Emily Dickinson's wooden chest, though in calibre there can be no comparison between the timeless poetry of Emily and Akhtar's scanty literary crea-

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[43]Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman*, p.xii.

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tions. However separated as these two women were in time, culture, country and race - in circumstances and marginalization their situations were surprisingly similar. Were any of the *bhadromohila* who took up the pen 'mad'? At this point in research on the women writers of Bengal, it is difficult to tell. Nurunnessa herself referred to her writing as a madness; but she was by all appearances a very sane person. In the preface to her first novel she had written how travelling with her husband had loosened the hold of purdah. She also noted "the utter madness of my writing books is based on these scanty experiences."[44]

More telling perhaps are the sketchy insights into the lives of Akhtar Mahal, Razia Khatun and Mamlukul Fatema. Akhtar was not as fortunate as Nurunnessa. She was born into an enlightened family of Faridpur, but after her marriage at the age of 12 to an elderly man who suffered from leukoderma, she did not find an environment conducive for her talents. Her grand-daughter recollects:

> Tales of our grandmother evoked wonder in us. For, it was a feat in those times of *aborodh* for a woman married into an orthodox family to develop her literary talent. She went on writing despite the obstacles.[45]

Her in-laws looked upon her creative activity and avid reading habit with disfavour. The short biographic note attached to the book *Niyontrita* states:

> Though she was born into a well educated family, Akhtar Mahal never had the opportunity to attend a school or college. She was taught some Urdu, Arabic and Bengali at home... But her thirst for knowledge was unbounded...She would start reading whatever was around. Her extreme passion for books was considered *a sort of*

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[44]Nurunnessa Khatun, preface to "Swapnadrishta", in *Nurunnessa Granthabali*, p.ii. (Italics mine).

[45]Raihan Begum, in publisher's note, *Niyontrita*, p.iv.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

madness by people around her.[46]

Razia and Akhtar died premature deaths; Fatema lived to an old age in a state of intellectual paralysis. Perhaps the merest coincidence, but Fatema like Emily (whose work Fatema probably never read), wore white in the later phase of her life. Much has been written about Emily's white garb;[47] very little is known or conjectured about the thought, dress or lives of Muslim *bhadromohila* at the turn of the century. Of the symbolism of the white dress in the nineteenth century, Gilbert and Gubar say:

> But the ambiguities of the Victorian white dress extend even beyond the tension of virginal vulnerability and virginal power... It is surely significant that doomed, magical, half-mad or despairing women ranging from Hawthorne's snow image to Tennyson's Lady of Shallot, Dicken's Miss Havisham...all wear white.[48]

About Emily's wearing it from the 1860s onwards, they hypothesize that "partly no doubt she did this to come to terms with the pain of that white dress in which so many nineteenth century women were imprisoned."[49]

In Bengali culture, white was associated with age and widowhood. Fatema took to wearing white when she was living and working alone in Dhaka and Calcutta. Later, she lived out 20 years of illness which was tinged with an intellectual paralysis and emotional melancholia, a shell of her former self. Drawing a connection between creative women's emotional and intellectual loneliness and wearing white apparel, Gilbert and Gubar observe: "... for Dickinson white also suggests both the pure potential of

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[46] Afsarunnessa, biographic note, *Niyontrita*, (Dhaka: Raihana Begum 1979) p.vi.

[47] See Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 613-619.

[48] ibid., p.617.

[49] ibid., p.621.

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a *tabula rasa*, a blank page, an unlived life..."[50] Akhtar Mahal was said to be melancholic and unhappy. Razia had bouts of what can be called mental maladjustment (See Chap.II above). Fatema lived in what can be identified as a state of endemic depression.[51] Rokeya Sakhawat, for whom neither personal nor public life was rosy, to say the least, retreated into a state of total closure on herself; but she survived, like some of the others.

Palimpsestic, many of these women's writings were. They often used socially accepted themes of motherhood, wifely companionship, ideal domesticity, etc., to forward their views on female emancipation, viz. education, eradication of purdah, abolition of polygamy, and so on. Sometimes an argument was led by the hand into totally unfamiliar grounds. Thus one finds Rokeya promoting a knowledge of horticulture and chemistry for success as a cook ! Weaving in and out of much of the social writings by women of the period 1900-1939, was an untiring and skillful advocacy of women's rights in the home and outside. It is in this area more than anywhere else that women displayed their agency. In her fiction Rokeya was a past master at using existing literary traditions for her own ideological ends. In *Sultana's Dream* she emerged from camouflage and veiling into a direct proclamation of her feminist vision by creating Ladyland where gender roles were reversed.

The various changes in the course of literary endeavours of Muslim women from Faizunnessa to Nurunnessa, recorded important changes in

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[50]ibid., p.6.15

[51]I say all this with due regard for the women mentioned and feel that society indeed extracted a heavy price from these women, who like Emily Dickinson, should have been born in some other time. As Ruqqaiyah Kabir, writer and political activist who lived through the 1930s and 1940s, said in her interview about a lost generation: "So few of them survived. Only those with sufficient grit." Incidentally, Ms Kabir is Akhtar Mahal's niece.

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their world. In terms of medium there was a transition from the poetry-prose of *Rupjalal* to the clear, modern prose of *Swapnodrishta*. In terms of form there was a shift from the part *punthi*, part proto-novel to more clear cut categories of the novel, short story or poem. In flavour and style the robust and passionate gave way to the restrained, romantic and respectable. There were similar changes in themes and content. Faizun dealt with love, longing and separation; with conquest and fairyland adventures. Nurunnessa dealt with love redefined and framed within the domestic. To Faizunnessa the real social and political events of the day were not worthy of representation (unless one reads Rupjalal as some sort of allegory, but this has not yet been attempted and it is doubtful if it was one).

The *bhadromohila*'s writings, on the other hand, were teeming with social themes, if not political ones. Faizun founded a girl's school, but it was easier in that period to found one than to discourse on it or to attend it. The popular press had not created the platform for women yet. But from 1900 onwards such a platform was possible and women, in taking up the pen, both used the initial space offered and slowly built it up as their own space in the journals and texts of the day. Very few went beyond the socially accepted themes of the day; Rokeya was an exception, but even she was circumscribed by existing ideologies and did not break the great silence on the truly personal or passionate. But the silence was not questioned and what remained articulated was not at the moment, at stake.

Thus, literature was the area of the *bhadromohila*'s self proclamation or her arrival in a sense. Education had equipped and prepared her to step outside as it mediated between the private and public spheres. In wielding the pen she no longer remained the object - but became the subject, although one working under male dominated cultural forms.

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CHAPTER VII
THE NEW WOMAN IN LITERATURE

As the debates on women's education, and role in the family raged all around, women themselves had joined in by taking up the pen. As this new brand of women went to schools, wrote and assumed different responsibilities in the home, a more subtle debate on the ideal of womanhood was taking place in the works of contemporary fictional writers. Fiction was the site where the moulders of public imagination (mainly the novelists and short story writers) were going to sculpt their various images of the 'new woman'.

The *bhadromohila* was a social category; the new woman was an abstraction; an archetypal representation found more often in the pages of literature than flitting down to the tram line on the way to classes at Bethune. The *bhadromohila* of course *was* a new woman, a new cultural entity. As a social aggregate she was counterpart to the *bhadrolok*, just as the new woman was counterpart to the new man. However, in speaking of the new woman, one is operating at a level of attribution (of traits) whereas in speaking about the *bhadromohila* one is locating the social manifestation of the ideal. For this, perhaps, contemporary fiction is the site where one encounters the new woman in her manifold selves - in her positive and negative aspects. The process of her creation and emergence is most clearly brought out there.

Victorian and Edwardian Roots

The construction of the new woman took place in the latter half of the nineteenth Century, among the enlightened Brahmo Community, within the framework of the Bengal Awakening. The concept itself had originated in Victorian England (1837-1901) and reached fullness in the Edwardian age

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(1901-1910).[1] But the new woman in England had been preceded by the stereotype of the Perfect Lady:

> Throughout the Victorian period the Perfect Lady as an ideal of femininity was tenacious and all pervasive in spite of its distance from the objective reality of countless women.[2]

The Perfect Lady, as noted above (in Chap. III), was a blend of good wife, mother and companion - educated and competent, living in a sphere separate but equal or complementary as propounded by John Ruskin in his *Sesames and Lilies* (1864). The image of the Perfect Lady coupled with a more diluted and functional version, the good wife/woman, dominated the social scene till it was challenged by groups of rising middle class women who were dissatisfied with their lot as defined by the prevalent ideals.

> The feminists who broke down the old stereotypes of the Perfect Lady were themselves to be slotted into a new pigeonhole and labelled with a new sticker - that of New Woman.[3]

Many of the new women came from the middle class and were fairly well off. They sought education, economic independence and political rights. Along with the good wife, to whom they were a challenge, they exerted significant sway in the English middle class from the turn of the last century down to the Second World War. English male writers frequently ridiculed the new woman and portrayed her as cruel, mocking, unfeminine and hostile. But she was heralded and celebrated by at least one male thinker, John Stuart Mill, as early as 1869 in *The Subjection of Women.* Like other ideological notions the concept of the new woman underwent a

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[1]See Chap. III above.

[2]Vicinus, (ed) *Suffer*, Introduction p. ix

[3]Deirdre Beddoe, *Discovering Women's History*, (London: Pandora, 1987) p.29

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

sea change on its journey eastward (See Chapter III - The Family in Transition) and in Bengal the 'new woman' had somewhat different connotations. She was an admixture of the Perfect Lady, the 'good wife' and the 'new woman'. She had manifold selves which were functions not only of time, but of class, culture and the particular discourse which was constructing her. It is thus important to bear in mind the distinctions, despite the similarities, between the archetype of the new woman in England and her counterpart in colonial Bengal. Here the term had diverse applicability and the connotations could shift quite fast. However some of her characteristics would be universally agreed upon (as some would not). For analytical convenience it is possible to make two lists of characteristics encountered in female protagonists in Bengali fiction of the period (which it is hoped will yield a composite picture of the new woman), fiction being the site where it was easiest to locate her. The new woman was expected to have such qualities as:

Group A

1) Some formal education and good taste.
2) Qualities of ideal mother, wife, helpmeet and housemaker.
3) Ideas of romantic love within marriage or leading to it.
4) Selflessness and ultimate submission to husband's will.
5) Altruistic qualities finding vent in social work.

Group B

1) Intellectual qualities.
2) Qualities of earning a livelihood.
3) Sexual awareness.
4) Independence of spirit.
5) Political awareness: finding vent in political participation.

The first set of qualities were universally agreed on. The second set was certainly more controversial and were often perceived as a subversion (or

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

distortion) of qualities in group A, by conservative opinion which felt threatened by the emergence of the new woman in society both as concept and reality. In most cases the traits were cumulative rather than mutually exclusive. Thus the heroine described as 'independent' would certainly also be chaste, romantic and selfless (e.g. Ayesha Siddika in Padmarag). Only on occasion would the heroine be independent *rather than* submissive, a breadwinner *rather than* a housewife.

But by and large the new woman in Bengal believed she should be educated enough to take up the role of an enlightened housewife and mother within the home which was her sacred responsibility. She believed in the new concept of companionship in conjugal relations and love as a basis for marital union. However she would not be long contained in this static role of domesticity. Some among the new women at least first questioned woman's subordinate position and then fought for educational, legal, political and economic rights. In colonial Bengal, the notion received one of its first formulations at the hands of the famous Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopaddhay (1838-1894) in his essay 'Prachina o Nabina' (written in the 1870s).

To the powers that be in society (the male *bhadrolok* in this case), the new woman was both a normative ideal or an emergent reality; or alternately, a misplaced and ill-gotten model and an emergent social problem. She could be an object of censure and ridicule, or of celebration; an asset, or a threat to the projected social order of the new middle class, depending on how she was being perceived and portrayed. Thus various names for the new woman were spawned in Bengal: *nabina, adhunika, naba nari, bhadromohila.* The *nabina* could be a receptacle of socially approved traits breathing whiffs of the glorious new age - embodying many of the *bhadrolok*'s notions of idealized and romanticized womanhood. The term *adhunika* on the other hand was more suspect - sometimes used derisively by both

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Hindu and Muslim writers. *Naba (natun) nari* was very rarely used (i.e. in *Basore*, see Chapter III).

The dominant ideology running through the vein of the Hindu and Brahmo intelligentsia at the time was that of anti-colonial nationalism. For the Muslims among whom the Awakening had occurred a few decades later (the 1870s onward) the major material and ideological concern was modernization and a quest for identity. This in turn generated two major discursive frameworks which circumscribed the construction of the new woman in Bengal. The quest for the new woman in fiction must be seen against both these wider historical contexts and ideological frameworks.

DISCURSIVE INFLUENCES

The novels on women that were produced by Muslim writers in Bengal, 1900-1940, drew upon two sets of discourses: one emanating from Muslim north India, the other within Bengal. The first actually comprised of two sub discourses - a) the liberal Muslim discourse promoted by the Aligarh scholars and represented by tracts such as Altaf Hussain Hali's *Majalis un nessa* (Assemblies of Women) and *Chup ki Daad* (Voices of Silence); and b) the orthodox Islamic discourse that developed in and around the seminary at Deoband, represented by texts such as Ashraf Ali Thanawi's manual for women - *Behesti Zewar.*

The north Indian discourses were attempting a reconstruction of sharif culture. Both the Aligarhians and Deobandis were in this sense proponents of a new order - though the former was forward looking and 'progressive'; and the latter looking backward for a return to purified and pristine social and religious principles. Both positions implied a rejection of unreconstructed, pre-modern culture on the ruins of which the new edifices would

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

have to be built.[4] The three positions in this triangular cultural order of the north were mutually exclusive in theory at least, or so their proponents liked to claim. In their bid for ideological power the Deobandis denounced both the dying Mughal cultural forms and the westernized, liberal ideas ensuing from Aligarh. They enjoined their own world view which was ready to take advantage selectively of modern technology and colonial employment, but not the culture and ideas accompanying them.

The Aligarhians too rejected the obsolete and unreformed *Sharif* culture of Mughal days and the 'regressive' reformism of the Deoband school. They were the new liberal *shurafa* of north India analogous to the *bhadrolok* in Bengal, representing (along with the Deobandis) the rising middle class of colonial India. Both Deoband and Aligarh exercised great influence over the Muslim mind in Bengal and the reformist projects in the province. With caution one could venture that the liberal tenets of Aligarh which advocated a reform scheme under the aegis of a liberalized and rationalized Islam, held the imagination of the better off urban dwellers and the rural literate, both remaining behind in the village or moving to towns, tended to favour the Deoband school. Educational reform, reform in family law and the new literature that was being produced by Bengal Muslims bore profound marks of these influences. The *ashraf* in Bengal had always looked to the seats of *sharif* culture in the north.

The printed word was increasingly becoming the vehicle of discursive dissemination with the spread of the lithograph and printing press in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Reformist tracts, behaviour manuals, journals and creative literature, bore and spread the message. Thanawi set

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[4]See David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) and Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) - for the legacies of the two schools.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

himself the task of reforming the traditional Muslim girl through his colossal, 11-volume behaviour manual the *Behesti Zewar*[5] which aimed to create the kind of person every woman, indeed every human ought to be. The key to that person was control. As Brbara Metcalf observes:

> The kind of person Thanawi envisagesd is of a type associated with sustained formation and discipline. That woman is quiet and guarded... orderly, clean and systematic... She is a person of 'minimal transactions', not one of those concerned with maximizing exchanges.[6]

Behesti Zewar was a manual to aid the pious Muslim girl through rough and changing times, to preserve sanctity of religion and prosperity of home and society. In short, a book for women who were "in touch with the changes of the times"... who would have to ride trains, post letters, bake biscuits, etc. Creative impulses were disapproved of in the rigid new personality enjoined. Reading novels was disfavoured (and for girls forbidden). Deoband scholars created no fictional literature - but even this was not free from the influence of the 'Deoband version' of the 'new woman'.

Hali was a familiar name in *sharif* Bengali homes along with his mentor Sir Syed Ahmed khan.[7] Some copies of *Khatun, Tahzib-un Niswan, Ismat* or *Parda Nashin* (all Urdu journals for women) may have also filtered into Bengal. But Urdu novels had the wide readership. The most well- known were the novels by Nazir Ahmed (1836- 1910) who portrayed the lives of women in his works: *Mirat-ul Arus (The Bride's Mirror), Banat-un Nas*

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[5]See Chapters II and III for more details.

[6]Barbara D. Metcalf, "Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi and Urdu Literature", in Christopher Shackle (ed) *Urdu and Muslim South Asia*, (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991), p.99.

[7]Shamsunnahar in an article on women's education in Muslim Bengal in *Mohammadi* (1940) even cited a verse from Hali's tract on women in the original Urdu.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

(Daughters of the Bier), Muhsinat (The Chaste Women) and Ayama (Widows).

Nazir Ahmed was followed by his nephew in-law Rashidul Khairi (1868-1936) who imitated his uncle's style and content. His novels too had women as central characters and were meant to instruct and provide emotional catharsis (entertain was hardly the intention as his heroines suffered and generally died in the end). Published during 1907-1917, Khairi's major novels — *Salihat* (The story of Saliha), *Subh-i Zindagi* (Dawn of life), *Sham-i Zindagi* (Evening of life), *Shab-i Zindagi* (Night of life) in two parts — all portrayed educated, competent, dutiful and pious heroines who provided a model for the new woman who must have been among the novels' voracious readers. The plots were formulaic where the good woman (new one) was often contrasted with a bad woman (the old one of the vanishing feudal order or alternately the modern one who was too westernized). The woman who was extolled was a cross between the Deoband and the Aligarh versions of the ideal woman.

Khairi's capable, pious and chaste heroines, such as Saliha, Naseema and Zaheda, were usually trapped in unhappy marriages but bore their lot in dignified silence and work. In their changing world polygamy co-existed with monogamy, traditional norms made way for modern ones, and society was caught in between.

All these novels would have found a place on Thanawi's list of proscribed books, and indeed Nazir's novels were mentioned by name. Metcalf alludes to Thanawi's likely reasons for disapproving of these works:

> We can assume that, as lines were drawn, these novels went too far in the direction of the cosmopolitan... English women are looked on with approval, books are read from both Thanawi's approved and disapproved lists, girls study history and play with dolls and women go beyond the bounds of being competent and responsible to being more independent than fits comfortably with their received

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

domestic role.[8]

In determining the discourses that influenced the portrayal of new women in fiction it is important to bear in mind how categories slipped into each other and the points where discursive boundaries broke down.

Thanawi's model woman, Nazir Ahmed and Khairi's heroines and the heroines of Bengali novels such as Najibar Rahman's *Anowara, Goriber Meye,* or Nurunnessa's *Atmadan* had much in common. They not only emanated from discourses which though declared as exclusive also overlapped - they were also the creations of a new middle class which was circumscribed by a homogenizing colonial regime.

THE BRAHMO DISCOURSE

The second major influence on the creation of the new woman in Muslim Bengal was exercised by the indigenous Brahmo discourse. As the community that had first developed a scheme for female emancipation, the Brahmos provided the first viable model. The stereotype of the *bhadromohila* that they developed was "created to suit the purpose of an elite under colonial rule," combining the virtues of the traditional Hindu woman with the Victorian woman's competence and accomplishments.

Brahmo reform was a long drawn out process and it is difficult to single out an influential text from the corpus of didactic material for women. Gourmohan Vidyalankar's *Stree Shiksha Bidhayak* had set out as early as 1822 certain basic objectives and guidelines for female education. The tract held sway for a long time and in principle did not differ much from what the Muslim reformers were to advocate later. The book enumerated "the advantages of education as including the ability to correspond

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[8]Barbara D. Metcalf, "Maulana Ashraf Ali", in Christopher Shackle (ed), p.99.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

with an absent husband to instruct one's children, and to do household accounts."[9] The good mother theory of education was also very popular. The argument that education was necessary for the creation of an enlightened mother and a worthy race, continued to be advanced throughout this period. In this the Muslim reformers were not advocating anything new.

It was in the 1870s that the Brahmo *bhadromohila* came into her own as a full fledged personality. As Borthwick observes:

> the ideal (of the *bhadromohila*) was to gain wide currency throughout the later nineteenth century through dissemination in a growing number of journals and instruction manuals for and by women.[10]

Some of these latter day texts were: *Shishu Palan* (1857) by Shib Chander Deb, *Kumari Shiksha* (1883) by Nabin Kali Dasi, *Baignyanik Dampatya Pranali* (1884) by Surja Narayan Ghosh, *Garhasthya Path* (1887) by Chandranath Basu, *Bou Babu* (1889) by Siddheshwar Ray.

The most influential women's journal was the *Bamabodhini Potrika*, which singlehandedly disseminated the ideals of and for the *bhadromohila* for almost half a century (1863-1906).[11]

In Bengal, literature had been a powerful agency of the Renaissance. The new creative tradition which developed from Bankim and Rabindranath to Sharatchandra also included several female writers. All of them in some of their works (and some of them in all their works) engaged in the portrayal of the new woman. One of the earliest portrayals, as noted above,

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[9]cited by Borthwick, p.63

[10]Borthwick, p.59. See her chapters on Conjugal Relations and Motherhood, pp.109 - 185, for details on the Brahmo discourse.

[11] Other women's journals included *Antahpur (1898-1906), Mahila (1897/98), Mahila Bandhab (1887).* See Borthwick's bibliography section.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

was Bankim's *Pracina O Nabina*, which skillfully censured the new woman as Bankim viewed her.[12]

The *bhadrolok*'s pen resorted to caricatures of the new woman, giving expression to society's deep-seated anxiety about them. A spate of *Prahasan* literature (comic satires), became very popular. They held the new woman up to ridicule and scorn, showing her as arrogant, unchaste, empty-headed in spite of education, undutiful and fun-loving. These comic satires were written for high brow audiences as well, and the new man as well as the new woman was object of fun and ridicule. Among the more popular *Prahasan* were: Jyotirindranath Tagore's *Kinchit Jalojog* (1872), Radhabinod Haldar's *Pash Kora Mag* (1888), Amritlal Basu's *Tajjab Byapar* (1890) and Rakhaldas Bhattacharya's *Swadhin Zenana* (1886).[13] For instance, Haldar makes his heroine, the Bethune educated Kironshoshi, say:

Husband-e kore dismis hoyechi pran new miss
Dibo ami sweet kiss free love never fear![14]

Durgadas De's heroine, the newly graduated Bino, of *Miss Binobibi B.A.*, is also made to sound ridiculous when she rattles off the most outrageous list of traits for her prospective husband (he must write plays like Shakespeare, poetry like Byron, etc.).

But despite this the new woman gained grounds, and carved out a niche for herself in the fiction of the day. There were more positive

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[12]Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanabali*, Vol II, Jogeshchandra Bagal (ed), (Calcutta: Sahitya Sangsad, 1954), pp. 249-256.

[13]See Sambuddha Chakravarty, *Unobingsha Shatabdite Bangali Bhadromohila*, (Bengali) (The Bengali Bhadromohila in the Nineteenth Century) (unpublished Ph.D. thesis), (Calcutta University, 1988), pp.130-164.

[14]Trans.: "I have dismissed my husband and become a new Miss; I shall bestow sweet kisses and free love, never fear!". See Radhabinod Haldar, *Pash Kora Mag* (Bengali) (The Female with Degrees), (Calcutta, 1295 BS), cited in Sambuddha Chakravarty, p.125.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

portrayals ensuing from the pen of illustrious writers such as Bankim, Rabindranath and Sharatchandra, and female writers such as Swarnakumari, Anurupa and Nirupoma Devi and Shailabala Ghoshjaya.

A particular strain of 'novels' - the *Garhasthya/Paribarik/Samajik Upanyas* (the domestic, familial and social novels) - which were more didactic than creative, were widely read at the time These were comparable to the didactic Urdu novels of the day (Nazir Ahmed's) and the later 'familial' novels by Najibar Rahman and Nurunnessa. These novels were moralistic, and instructional, eschewing all manner of non-legitimate relationships and emotions, upholding chaste love and passion. All very essential for 'reforming' societies, no doubt. Among these were: Rameshchandra Dutt's *Sangsar* (The Household, Calcutta, 1875) and *Samaj* (Society, Calcutta, 1893) and Gopal Chandra Dutt's *Sulochona Athaba Adarsha Bharja* (The Exemplary Wife, Calcutta, 1882), etc. Fortunately for Bengali readers with a different taste, more exciting fare was available in the truly creative works of the day. Bankim was one of the first to create convincing flesh and blood heroines on the threshold of the coming age - in his widely read novels like *Bish Briksha, Krishnakanter Will*, etc.

Swarnakumari Devi, hailed as the first female novelist in Bengal, started her literary career in 1876. Mrinalini, the heroine of her novel *Kahake?*, termed by one recent critic "almost a feminist novel"[15], simultaneously adhered to and questioned concepts of romantic love and had little faith in patriarchal notions of chastity (i.e. a woman should fall in love only once) which she was willing to violate, at least platonically. The novel was translated into English at the writer's bidding as *The Unfinished Song*; it had all the flavour of a Victorian novel set in the parlour of the elite in

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[15]Humayun Azad, "Women's Women: Images in Women's Fiction in Bangla", paper read at seminar 'Women in Literary and Popular Media', organized by Dept. of English, Dhaka University, Dhaka, (December 1992)

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

colonial Bengal. It is heavily interspersed with English sentences, showing the multi-cultural character of the new woman penned by a new woman herself, though an exceptionally talented one, belonging to the illustrative Tagore family.

Shailabala Ghoshjaya's heroine in *Shekh Andu* also broke patriarchal norms in falling in love with the Muslim chauffeur. However, such unusual attractions where romantic love found expression outside of marriage did not find universal favour. Other writers resorted to the more acceptable theme of love or its absence within marriage. As Borthwick observes:

> ... the element of romance found in European marriages was emerging in the new Bengali literature of the later nineteenth century. It must have created expectations of love and romance in marriage even though the idea had not yet met with social approval.[16]

Examples of such works would be: Swarnakumari's *Kahake?* (Whom?, 1898), Jogendranath Chattopadhay's *Swami O Stree* (Husband and Wife, 1894), and Nirupoma's *Didi* (Elder Sister, 1915). Most female protagonists finally succumbed to their husbands in these novels: Nirupama's Saroma, Anurupa's Bani in *Mantroshakti* (Power of Mantra, 1915) as well as Tagore's Bimala in *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World, 1916). Bimala's route, of course, was more complicated. She was painstakingly sculpted into the new woman (by her husband), made to 'come out' of the cocoon that was the home (*ghar*) into the wide world outside in a mental journey which had to demolish many patriarchal walls. In the novel the journey was symbolically recreated by Bimala being led by her husband from the *andarmahal* to the *bahir barhi*. But once outside she fell in love with her husband's friend only to be disillusioned when it was too late to return to the patriarchal security of husband and home. The women portrayed here were a cross

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[16] Borthwick, p.132

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

between the traditional Hindu woman and the new one. They were educated, romantic, dutiful - torn by love and yet generally restrained. Like Nazir Ahmed's heroines they suffered in silence, but some at least raised questions about extant gender relations and the oppression of women. None of the constructions of the new woman was free from the ambivalence and anxiety that society felt toward this phenomenon. How far could she be allowed to go, striding/gliding through the pages of literature, as she did? These anxieties were caught by writers Hindu or Muslim, male or female.

It is interesting that *Didi* and *Mantroshokti* were both published around the same time as Najibar Rahman's *Anowara* and a decade or so before the first novels by Muslim *bhadromohila*, viz Nurunnessa's *Swapnodrishta* and Rokeya's *Padmarag*. The first three novels subscribed to a similar discourse on female sexuality, and the inviolability of the domestic order. What probably set the first two novels apart was their more evolved literary style (the famed Sharatchandra is said to have expressed a twinge of light-hearted jealousy vis-a-vis Anurupa).

Sharatchandra's *Shesh Prashna* (The Last Question) more than any other novel portrayed the ultimate new woman's rejection of patriarchy. It was serialized intermittently in *Bharatbarsha* from 1927 to 1931. Komol, the female protagonist will remain the celebrated feminist heroine for a long time to come. Rokeya's heroine in *Padmarag* also presents us with what can almost be described as a counter-discourse to domestic ideology.[17] *Bhadro* Muslim men and women were avid consumers of these works. Bankim, Rabindranath, Sharat and other writers were household words in their homes. The romantic reader admired the passion and tragedy of the heroines created by Bankim, Rabindranath or Sharat in their novels; the refor-

[17] My intention here is not to evaluate literary works but to provide a context for the emergence of the new woman in selected Muslim literary texts. More discussions follow.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

mist one extricated the values of nobility, thrift or patriotism portrayed therein. (For instance, the *ashram* Tarini Bhavan in Rokeya's *Padmarag*, was headed by the incomparable Din Tarini Sen - receptacle of all socially desirable traits). The puritan one eschewed such frivolity and could settle for Bhudev Mukherjee's social essays or Ramesh Chandra's didactic novels.

THE TEXTS

The story of the new woman in the works of Muslim writers will be traced through selected novels of Najibar Rahman (1860-1923), Nurunnessa Khatun Bidyabinodini (1894-1975), Akhter Mahal Syeda Khatun (1901-1929), and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein (1880-1932). The texts discussed were published from 1914 to 1936. Both Najibar and Nurunnessa were wellknown novelists; Akhter Mahal wrote two novellas in her brief lifetime; Rokeya was more social worker, educationist and essayist than a fiction writer.

Najibar Rahman hailed from Pabna. He took up teaching and writing after finishing study at the Normal School. Though he attended the founding meeting of the Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906, he spent most of his life in the countryside, pursuing the quiet life of writer and teacher. Najibar was by far the most popular Muslim novelist of the day, specially among members of the rural and semi-urban literate society — those he wrote about. Didactic novels as noted above were very popular in re-forming societies where values and norms were perceived to be in transition or abeyance (e.g. Nazir Ahmed and Ramesh Dutt's novels). Women as the repository of tradition and ritual life, were deemed the special target of instruction. In this sense, both *Anowara* and *Goriber Meye* were designed to guide and instruct the new woman, that is, Najib's model of her.

His works were set in surroundings which were semi-rural with rumblings of Calcutta the great metropolis in the background; among populations who had a school and a post-office, perhaps a hospital, but retained their

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

agricultural mode of existence. His heroines were born into peasant families or well-to-do rural households. They studied and in due course under the able tutelage of their husbands, became *bhadromohila* or gentlewomen - model wives, mothers and housekeepers. His heroes too were of the new breed of men possessing an education which was often a cross between a *madrasa* and an English one. They worked under the colonial government but ultimately won freedom from such slavish employment and set up independent businesses. There was much talk of transfers and government postings, promotions and salaries as well as a rejection of this subservience to the Raj. There were references to polygamous marriages though these were often apologetic and troubled. The entire impression one gets is of a world in flux, of a middle class emerging from a semi-rural background. All of these were real elements of the contemporary social scene.

Anowara (meaning 'string of stars') - the name of his sixteen-year old heroine was his first *Samajik O Paribarik Upanyas* (social and familial novel). His aim was to portray the exemplary life of a virtuous woman and to trace the course of romantic love as it developed within the constrictive framework of respectable Muslim society. At the opening of the book the beautiful Anowara was a meritorious pupil at the village school. She had received the model education of a sharif girl having familiarity with the following texts: The *Holy Koran, Meftahul Jinnat, Rahe Nazat, Pand Nama, Gulistan*, etc. But these Urdu and Arabic texts were not the sole objects of her study for the culture of Bengal Muslims was more syncretic than this. So the author rattled off another list:

> The girl is beautiful, good-natured and meritorious. Her knowledge of health science, geography and Indian history is sound. Her comprehension of *Charu Pat, Sitar Banabash and Meghnad Badh Kabya* is deep. The inspector of schools awarded her Rs. 10 for her

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

needle-work.[18]

Undoubtedly Anowara was made to be the perfect heroine alias the perfect wife, mother and companion. Hovering over her like a dark shadow, was Gulabjan, Anowara's thrice married, once beautiful, jealous stepmother. Gulabjan was unlettered as Anowara was educated, slothful and lazy as Anowara was neat and industrious, mean as Anowara was noble. Gulabjan was the 'old woman' (A distorted version, no doubt, to suit Najibar's reformist objectives) - Anowara was the glorious new one, created and approved by the author.

The stepmother wrought havoc in Anowara's life, but she fortunately got married to the ideal man - the hero Nurul Eslam. Nurul Eslam had interrupted his studies at Calcutta at his father's death to take up employment at a jute firm in a port town. Anowara and Nurul fell in love when inadvertently (as sharif girls were in strict purdah) Nurul caught a glimpse of her at her window while reciting from the Holy Koran in his boat. She fell in love with his beautiful and rapt recitation. The author went a bit further. Nurul was an amateur doctor and when Anowara fell ill a few days later, he was called in. In true Victorian fashion, he put the tuft of her hair snipped to make room for a poultice into his pocket, to cherish forever. Earlier Nurul had refused marriage to a well-born girl on the grounds that "though beautiful she was uneducated and marriage the most important relationship of a person's life, a holy union, could only bear fruit if the girl were educated."[19]

It is within marriage that the couples' true love unfolded and developed. Anowara stepped into the complete role assigned her - of wife,

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[18]Najibar Rahman, *Anowara*, (Calcutta: 1914; rept. Dhaka: Ananda Prokashan, 1988), p.3.

[19]ibid., p.30

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

beloved, helpmeet, advisor, housekeeper and mother. Nurul is often away from home. There were romantic exchanges by post. He addressed her as *Pranadhike* (More beloved than one's heart) and she addressed him in the manner set down by the best instruction manuals of the days: "Holy sir, a million salams at your feet, etc."[20] Their days passed in harmonious domesticity. Drama is introduced in the novel as in Goriber Meye through the device so popular to patriarchy - woman's chastity put to the test.

The local lecher, Abbas Ali, had seen the beautiful Anowara accidentally. Consumed by desire he sought the help of the village *Boshtomi*, Durga. (By then *bhadro* culture had started to perceive the *Boshtomi/Vaishnava* culture as dark and licentious. The latter's notions of love and sexuality were not favoured by the puritan *bhadro* mind) Durga's machinations lured the unsuspecting Anowara into the forest to pick a herb for her ailing husband at dead of night where Abbas's men abducted her. Fortunately she was rescued before harm could befall her and reunited with her husband. But in a scene that is reminiscent of the Ram and Sita legend, the seed's of doubt were implanted in Nurul's mind. The couple were estranged. As in *Goriber Meye*, the end is happy, the heroine's chastity established beyond a shadow of doubt. The moral: The world outside (the forest, in fact) is full of lurking dangers. The new woman must step with caution.

But could Anowara be called the new woman? In a passage where her husband entreated her to give evidence in court against Abbas, from behind a screen, she refused. She proudly referred to herself as *Asurjyampashya* (one whom the sunlight has not touched)[21]. Anowara chided Nurul: "Can the *Asuryampashya* wife of the esteemed Dewan speak to

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[20]ibid. p.72 .

[21]A term used for traditional dwellers of the dark *andarmahal.* Rokeya used the term *aborodhbasini* (those behind the fort or wall), deploringly a few years later.

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unknown men? Fie!"[22]

Anowara took pride in her seclusion. She was not willing like some other women of the time to relax her standards toward a more liberal form of *purdah*. Though she did finally give evidence in court. Najib had painted a widely prevalent notion of womanhood. Anowara was unwilling to speak before strange men, but willing and equipped to write down her statement. This was the extent of new womanhood as conjured by the author of *Anowara*.

In *Goriber Meye* (The Poor Man's Daughter, 1923), Najibar Rahman literally constructed the new woman, through the person of Nuri. Or rather he made the male protagonist, Nur Mohammad do the constructing. In the brief and sarcastic preface to the book, Najib proclaimed:

> *Goriber Meye* is not a novel as such. If the reader is looking for fantastic plots and thrilling sojourns with the heroine, I suggest that he/she close the book. On the other hand if the reader is willing to follow the growth and education of simple girls in countless middle class Bengali homes and the lives of quiet domesticity spent in their midst - then my labour is rewarded.[23]

Najib aimed at creating new 'role models' for lower to middle class literate society. Nuri (Nurjehan) had an indomitable yearning for education. Being poor she sold her goat to pay for it at the village school. At twelve, she reached the middle vernacular level. The religio-secular education imparted there was similar to the one received by Anowara and included *Rahe Nazat, Meghnad Badh Kabya, Sitar Banabas,* arithmetic, geography, sewing, etc. At this point the most dramatic event of her life occurred. She got married to Nur Mohammad, an educated man of good lineage who was employed as

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[22]ibid., p.142

[23]Najibar Rahman, *Goriber Meye*, (Bengali) (Poor Man's Daughter), (Calcutta: 1923; rept. Dhaka: Ananda Prokashan, 1988), Preface.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

English teacher at a government boy's school. It was under the tutelage of her husband, that Nuri received her parallel and more significant education which was to make her a full-fledged woman of the time.

Nur was already married to the well-born and beautiful Tohura. But Tohura belonged to the old feudal world. She had never received any schooling; with this lack went slothfulness, arrogance and meanness of character. Fed up with Tohura's inability or unwillingness to improve herself, Nur in a fit of rage, pledged that he would marry an educated girl and inculcate such noble traits in her that the barbaric Tohura would bow in front of the new bride and her accomplishments. Tohura was matter out of which the new woman could not be fashioned, but Nuri was. So Tohura was set aside and rejected by Nur whose religion allowed him to take a second wife. But the hero was also a product of the times, of the Muslim Renaissance. Najib could not let the matter of polygamy pass without a discourse on it which took place in Chapter 16 in the form of a debate between Nur's soul and mind. Polygamy was not condoned. An uneasy justification was provided in the guise of Nur's misery, Tohura's failure and the impending breakdown of domestic harmony.

Nuri's transformation began on the wedding night when her husband learnt she did not say her prayers (a truly traditional woman would have done this actually but in the novel the 'old woman' Tohura was a degenerate version and did not offer *Namaz* either). Nur asked Nuri to perform the ablutions: "Nur Sahib smiled and said, 'Come let me show you the way.', and entered the prayer room. Thus they stepped into marriage through this holy ritual."[24]

One night, on being asked to recite a poem on women's education, Nuri asked: "Are you the school inspector, sir?", and he replied, "Why not think

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[24]ibid., p.18

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I am."[25] And no wonder; because thrilled with her elocution he fetched her a reward, nothing less than an exemplary life of the prophet. Nur's tutorship was never at rest. He set her lessons, tested her memory, taught her housework and orderliness. He wanted to show his first wife Tohura that it was possible "to create the perfect wife". But Nuri's lack of beauty bothered him till the day he could say:

> I was somewhat saddened by what you seemed to lack in physical charm till I was confronted last night by your learning, and nobility. I have no regrets... Now if you follow my every instruction to the letter, I hope to mould you into the ideal woman.[26]

He supervised every aspect of her education and upbringing. To supplement her school curriculum, he sent her instructional reading material by post - e.g. Bhudeb Babu's essays on domestic life. To improve her mind he gave her biographies of great men. He attended to every detail of her dress - the sari she would wear on the first day of school, her ornaments, even her hairdo:

> Nuri came to ask his leave before setting out for school. He drew her near, 'Come, I shall arrange your hair in a new fashion.' Having coiled her hair in a bun he took the brooch and the bracelet and pinned them on. Nuri was resplendent in her sari, her jewels. She donned the burqa and left for school.[27]

Nuri already had the makings of a good housekeeper. She transformed her husband's neglected home into a gleaming haven. Floors were scoured clean of the dirt left by Tohura's neglect, clothes were washed and darned, thrift introduced into household accounts, the mother-in-law tended, the

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[25]ibid., p. 22

[26]ibid., p.26

[27]ibid, p.61

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step children fed, her husband's every demand fulfilled.

But Nuri's metamorphosis was only partial. For the final re-casting, the last stroke of the brush, must ensue from the husband. Nuri's knowledge was raw, incomplete. Her greatest virtue was her ability to receive and follow instructions. She could cook everyday meals but not delicacies, like *Halwa* or *Korma*. Nur Mohammad even came out calmly with recipes for these most cherished of Mughal delicacies one day ! One must remember that by 1923 manuals such as *Beheshti Zewar* were already popular in Bengal. It was clear that the husband's role was to mould, to guide. Not to have done so on Nur's part would have been uncaring. He showed her how to post letters prior to his departure for employment in a distant province.

Romantic exchanges by post followed in true pseudo-Victorian fashion of love within matrimony with a Bengali twist. He addressed her as *Hriday-ranjini* (She who colours my heart), she signed off as: Your Servant. One is reminded for a moment of Satyendranath's or Keshub's letters to their wives, by the form at least if not the content. The day came when Nuri passed her Entrance with flying colours. After some vicissitudes (rather tame though meant to be dramatic, for the novels made up in pedagogic context what they lacked in creative or narrative skill) which Nuri's chastity was unfairly called into question, the couple was reunited. Nuri was now the total wife, mother and companion. Her journey to new woman-hood was complete. In the end she was running a school for girls near her home - thus replicating the process, with a difference. This time *she* ran the school.

To celebrate the new woman, Najib (also Rokeya and the others) have perhaps unfairly degraded the old one. It was necessary to their project. The new woman was an instrument for social recasting, as well as a sanc-tuary in a colonial reality. Order, and efficiency in the home were essential to the reconstructionist project - to contain chaos (*fitna*), and energize the

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

nation. A more active public role for women in literature would be advocated later, but not yet.

Nurrunnessa Khatun Bidyabinodini (1894-1975) was among the first female novelists of Muslim Bengal with the publication of *Swapnodrishta* in 1924. Rokeya's *Padmarag* appeared next year though it was written around 1903. In *Swapnodrista* there was no new woman; in fact there was no female protagonist. She was 'seen' once in a vision in a dream of the male protagonist Anwar at the beginning of the book. She never appeared before Anwar till the last page, that too behind her bridal veil at their wedding ceremony. The vision was sent, so to speak, by Anwar's former wife who had died when the novel began. Nurunnessa had to resort to this supernatural device, probably out of reverence for her society's insistence on female invisibility.

It was in her shorter works, a set of there novellas (or stories rather), *Bhagyachakra, Bidhilipi and Niyoti* (published circa 1936 from Serampore) where one sees a notable shift in Nurunnessa's writings. Here she portrayed three flesh and blood women - Suniti, Ashalata and Rokeya - and addressed the matter of romantic attraction. It was customary in those days to base love on a glimpse caught in a dream, or the magic strains of a flute or a voice heard from a distance and such other devices which safeguarded Muslim insistence on purdah and purity. Of course this was the age in which romantic, exchanges between married couples were a novel(!) phenomenon. Thus fiction writers were careful to be true to reality (after all they were avowedly writing social and familial novels). Nurunnessa's three stories were therefore unusual in that the hero and heroine were seen in the physical presence of each other and that the triad depict the flowering of *purborag*.[28] Also interesting is the fact that

[28] See Chap. III - *Priya*.

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the author narrated her stories in a Christian, Hindu and Muslim setting. This has led her biographer to comment:

> The distinguishing feature of the triad was the depiction of romantic love. This may appear natural in the case of Hindu and Christian communities, but must be deemed unnatural in the case of Muslim society. The reason may well be that Muslim society had not yet been able to shake off the nightmarish shackles of the strict seclusion (*aborodh*) with which their women folk were encircled.[29]

Perhaps for this reason, as a gesture to contemporary attitudes, Nurunnessa subscribed the epithet 'An Imaginary Tale' only under the title of the story in the Muslim setting, "Niyoti".

Bhagyachakra was the story of a Presidency educated Brahmin youth Saroj and his love for his classmate, the beautiful Miss Suniti Bose, who was the daughter of a wealthy Christian lawyer in Calcutta. The story was set in the hubbub of this great city. Miss Bose was by far the most modern and accomplished of her women: "Today Suniti has donned a pale turquoise, gossamer sari over a pale pink chemise and was striking the keys of the piano with her delicate hands."[30] The piano played in the background, afternoon tea was served with cake [sic], dinner arranged on the table and laid out with forks and knives - in Mr Bose's posh house. There was no censure in Nurunnessa's voice, even when Saroj converted to Christianity. (For conservatives - Hindu or Muslim - could be surprisingly one in their defence of tradition). The 'new woman' was celebrated in the simple plot which had no tension or drama other than Saroj's conversion.

For her other two stories Nurunnessa changed the initial setting to the

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[29]Rashid-al Faruki, *Nurunnessa Khatun Bidyabinodini*, (Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 1987), p.38.

[30]Nurunnessa Khatun, *NG*, p.54

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

landed gentry in the village. The heroine of *Bidhilipi*, Ashalota, is a Hindu widow - reared in a village, but educated according to the *bhadro* precepts of the day. The story traced the development of romantic attraction between the young and beautiful widow and the English educated *zamindar* Harinarayan Ray. After some initial difficulties, the couple were finally united in holy matrimony under the auspices of a Widow Remarriage association in Calcutta. Rokeya Khatun, the female character of *Niyoti* was almost a *purda nashin*, albeit an educated and romantic one. Orphaned in childhood, she was lovingly reared by her uncle Mir Sahib. Instead of the piano and the parlour of Mr Bose's home in Calcutta, we have the flute played by Reza, son of the local *zamindar*, every evening by the river bank. Rokeya spied the youth from behind her window and fell in love with his music. Reza's late father had expressed his desire long ago, to make Rokeya Reza's future wife. But the two had quarreled, Reza's father had died and Mir fallen on bad days. Reza's mother, the haughty widow, was consumed by family pride and would not even hear of such a match. But Reza was of the new breed of men. He was training to be a doctor in Calcutta Medical College. On seeing Rokeya one day (just by accident, no parlour talk in this case) while visiting the Mir house he fell in love. The author could have the hero and heroine fall in love before marriage but could not quite march them off to the altar. Reza could not defy his mother's command and marry Rokeya. He left for Calcutta instead, dropped his examination and fell ill. Rokeya died. Her one act of boldness was the letter she wrote to Reza in Calcutta, craving to see him. But this was no brazen invitation violating norms of *Sharif/bhadro* decorum. It was a chaste plea sent from her death bed, to catch a last glimpse of him.

Even so, it was a long way from the glimpse of the motionless and practically non-existing 'heroine' in *Swapnodrishta*! To have gone beyond this would have been violation of a literary code - the novel's commitment

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

to reality. As observed in the preface to Nurunnessa's *Granthabali*:

> Illicit passion and love were not the ingredients of her novels. Therefore, she has depicted, romantic love in a domestic setting. In this, Nurunnessa's novels reflect the reality of contemporary society.[31]

The theme of romantic love before and during marriage runs through several of Fatema Khanam's short stories, also e.g. *Asroy (1926), Sagor-sangjog (1926) and Dor* (1930). The most finely drawn portrait of purborag occurred in Asroy. Both Azad and Hena were drawn in the romantic tradition of the time - pledged to each other for eternity, surmounting all odds till destiny bound them together in the sacred bond of marriage. This, from the pen of a woman who had to spend a lifetime of loneliness away from a husband whom she could not accept as her true companion for life.

But puritanism often stood in the way of *purbo-rag* in these portrayals. The former was quite evident in women's construction of the new woman even among the more enlightened group. For instance, in her short story *Narir Dharmo*, Razia Khatun depicted the harmful effects of so-called 'modernization' whereby women of the *andarmahal* were forcibly brought out of purdah into the social world of clubs and parties. Mahbub a government employee with 'misplaced' western notions of modernity forced his beautiful wife Rowshan to leave her purdah and mix with his colleagues and their wives. At a party, the Commissioner, a debauch of sorts, tried to assault Rowshan. The following events were tragic. Rowshan's bitter lament as she replied to Mahbub's letter of divorce did not sound like the words of a new woman:

> I have one thing to say: Woman's modesty is above everything.

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[31]Mohammad Abdul Qaiyyum, *NG*, Preface.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

> Therefore, sentence her to a dismal death behind *aborodh*, even that is preferable - but do not drag her into a world of animal lust !...[32]

This kind of 'puritanism' characterizes most of the women's writings of the period, including Akhtar Mahal's "Niyontrita" and Mamlukul Fatema's "Dor". A study of their writings shows that most of them felt it was 'liberated' enough to suggest that husband and wife have a full relationship in the sense of participating together in household events such as meals, talking to each other, expecting mutual love and respect, and accompanying him wherever his job took him rather than spending years with the mother in-law. These were elements of change for the women of the period, inconceivable some decades earlier. Thus, the women who wrote and who were themselves both a catalyst and object of the transformation, were painfully sensitive and alert to the continuously lurking accusation of sexual lapse that might be brought against them. Often, one may infer, the only weapon available was to take refuge behind an exaggerated puritanism. It was almost as though the price to be paid for stepping into the *bahir* from the *ghar* were a deliberate desexualization on the part of the women concerned.

The themes of love, longing and death were also evident in Akhtar Mahal's works. She was born into a wealthy and enlightened family of Faridpur district in East Bengal. Her brother Mujibur Rahman was among one of the first Bengali Muslims to enter the Indian Civil Service. Her novels, like Najibar's, depicted a society in transition. The decadent landed gentry co-existed with the new professional class, the oppressed wife in the traditional *andarmahal* (Ayesha) was pitied by the happier wife of the deputy magistrate (Shirin Begum), the new nuclear home with its 'novel- reading' mistress was contrasted with the unhealthy air of the semi-feudal house-

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[32]Razia Khatun, *RKRS*, p.74

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hold. There were cars in the background and enlightened men of the new breed, as there were hints of wine, women and semi-feudal debauchery.

In an age when reading novels depicting romance and love was deemed immoral by many quarters, let alone writing them, Akhtar Mahal tried to grapple with the issue of love and attraction. In her first novel *Niyontrita* (The Regulated), serialized in the journal *Naoroze* from 1927-28, Akhtar Mahal addressed the problem of romantic attraction outside of marriage in Muslim society. It took the form of the female protagonist, Ayehsa's unrequited love for a married man, Anwar, who probably reciprocated the feeling silently. Although no exchange took place between them, Ayesha pronounced the harshest judgement on herself when she first realized her heart was irrevocably lost to Anwar. Her attraction was so deep that she could never come to love her own husband when she got married. This she felt was a violation of God's commandment which she was bound by religion to execute: "An entire life of penance cannot redeem you from the sin you have committed today."[33]

Love outside marriage could result only in suffering. But the novel is not as innocuous as might seem at first glance. In a language and style that was reminiscent of Swarnakumari Devi and Nirupoma Devi, Akhtar Mahal approached the theme of desire in a woman. There were passionate references to yearning, the blue depths of a man's eyes, longing in a woman's. There was a brief moonlit scene where Ayesha and Anwar faced each other. The reader is not sure what transpired - a kiss? An embrace? That was one of their last meetings. However, Akhtar Mahal went to great lengths to expiate her heroine by endowing her with the qualities of the ultimate mother (since she could not endow the qualities of the ultimate wife): "On giving birth to her daughter, Ayesha felt blessed. What more

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[33]Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun, "Niyontrita" in *Niyontrita* (Dhaka: Raihana Begun, 1979), p.12.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

could she want, Ayesha told herself. I am blessed, lord, fulfilled!"[34] Even when her half mad husband beat her, she remembered he was father of her children and bowed her head in reverence.

Despite its prevarication between the saintly mother and love torn heroine, the repelled wife and the dutiful one, the author maintained the unusual, even daring, theme to the end. Ayesha loved one other than her husband. Till the last page she did not relinquish her love. Was Ayesha then, a 'new woman'?

It is believed that the romantic, *antahpur*-educated Akhtar Mahal (whose writings earned such praise from their house guest Nazrul Islam) was herself locked in an unhappy marriage to a much older, leukoderma patient. The mysteries and miseries of her brief life were lost forever by her untimely demise. One critic at least, thinks *Niyontrita* may have been autobiographical.[35] All we know is that she was unhappy till the end.[36] We hear Mahal's heroine lamenting the fate of women who were trapped between old and new; whose sensibilities were aroused in that they knew of new worlds and possibilities, but could not enter them. As Ayesha says in her closing lines:

> Mother, lying in your grave, it is your daughter ! Bid me goodbye. I leave the land forever. I am the ill-fated, accursed daughter of Bengal. My soul is not here where my body is.[37]

(Not here, but somewhere in a land whose contour she could only see from afar.)

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[34] Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun, ibid, p.32.

[35] Abul Fazal, "Niyontrita", *Abul Fazl Rachanavali*, (Chittagong: Boighar 1975)

[36] Interview with her niece Ms Rokeya Kabir, Dhaka, September 1992.

[37] Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun, *Niyontrita*, p.51.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

In *Moron Boron* (Welcome to Death), published in 1929 the year Akhtar Mahal died, a self-effacing remorse and desolation took the place of quilt, when Hasenara, the main female character of the novel, realized that her adored husband Abdul was actually in love with the beautiful Laili and had married her only for practical reasons. Her bitterness was intensified when she suddenly discovered her husband and Laili locked in a passionate embrace. The description of this forbidden encounter (assault on Laili rather) was vivid and sensuous - one of the rare passages of this kind. However, at the sight of a repentant Abdul Aziz later, the forgiving Hasenara realized "her husband was innocent. The temptress Laili had led her angelic husband into a moment of folly."[38] The (male) writer of the introduction comments: "Such faith and trust in the husband, and dependence on him, are abiding characteristics of the women in the country."[39] This was indeed to be a cardinal feature of the new woman, both in fiction and reality. The story ended with the burial of Hasenara.

Rokeya's only novel *Padmarag* (written in 1903 and published in 1925) questioned the very domesticity described above and presented what may be termed a counter discourse. At first it would seem Padmarag too was set in a household where women's lives revolved round numerous domestic chores. But a closer look immediately informs the reader of the very unusual nature of the household.

For Tarini Bhaban where the main action unfolds was nothing short of an *ashram* peopled only by women. Men were conspicuously absent in this sanctuary, except as rare visitors or an occasional patient. The Bhaban was run by the widow Din Tarini or Mrs. Sen. Its inmates gathered from vari-

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[38]Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun, "Morom-Boron" in *Niyontrita*, p.x.

[39]Abdul Kader, ibid., Introduction.

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

ous creeds, classes and communities, to live a life of hard work and dignity. Though some of them were married, most of them were no longer bound in a state of matrimony or circumscribed by other institutions of patriarchy. The Tarini 'sisters' worked in the various sections of the Tarini complex: The School, the Hospital, the Workshop, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Women, and the Widow's Home. It was located in the metropolis of Calcutta but the shadowy contours of the city never encroached directly on the main drama, because the *ashram* was part Utopia, part reality. It was the author's projection of what could be fashioned - a model institution where the oppression of class, gender, caste and religion, is laid to rest. Rokeya gave to it a timeless quality, an, universality beyond the middle class home. The contemporary periodical *Samyabadi* reviewing *Padmarag* remarked:

> Tarini Bhaban, in the novel Padmarag is a rare creation... The characters are noble... Here Hindu, Muslim, Brahmo and Christian women live in harmony and dignity. I request every man and woman to read this book.[40]

And what kind of heroine might one expect in a setting such as this? Rokeya did not disappoint us. The very arrival of the heroine was shrouded in mystery. Her true identity was hidden behind other identities as her true name was ensconced within other names. It seemed almost as if the author wanted to say if one was to arrive at the essence of the new woman, one had to travel through various layers — for the new woman was a composite of many women. And so the heroine had various names - She was Padmarag to the inmates of Tarini Bhaban and Ayesha Siddika to the reader, Zainab to her relatives, and all three to Latif, her admirer and husband. In the first scene the reader was presented the figure of a man

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[40]Book Review, *Samyabadi*, Falgun 1331 BS, cited in Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Banglar*, p.389.

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- in coat, hat, boot in the dress of an Englishman, in fact, sported by the 'new men' of colonial Bengal at the time. But this apparition was none other than the feminine and accomplished heroine Ayesha Siddika alias Zainab.

Siddika soon became a part of Tarini Bhaban. As the story of Padmarag unfolds the reader detects the one thematic unity with the otherwise totally different novel Goriber Meye. Here too, the shadow of a co-wife provides the fundamental tension of the plot. Here again one finds the male protagonist the brilliant barrister Latif Almas, caught against his will and inclination in a polygamous relationship. He had initially been married to Siddika but before the groom could even set eyes on the bride and take her to his home an avaricious and conniving uncle managed to intervene and prevent the consummation of the marriage. Latif falsely convinced by the same uncle that Siddika and her family did not want him was then compelled to take a second wife - Saleha. Siddika felt rejected, but braced herself for a life of independence and her loving brother aided her in the process. She emerged as a new woman - educated, capable, enlightened, chaste and independent of spirit. Fate conspired and brought Siddika and Latif face to face in Tarini Bhavan. They fell in love.

Latif compared Siddika (who is the heroine as well as his legitimately wedded wife though he doesn't know it, but the reader does), to his wife in everyday life - Saleha. Siddika scored on every count. The author had dismissed Saleha in a few ungenerous lines: "Saleha knew her fortune had fetched her an eligible husband and thought it unnecessary to cultivate any other grace or virtue. She was quarrelsome and ill tempered - her main task was beating servants every day."[41] Siddika on the other hand was the epitome of beauty grace and kindness. Her English poems had fetched prizes, her management of her brother's vast estate was laudable. She

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[41]R. S. Hossein, "Padmarag", *RR*, p.358.

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was feminine yet independent of spirit, apparently destitute but proud in her adversity, romantic and love-lorn but utterly restrained, modern but virtuous - the ultimate romantic heroine - whom no *bhadrolok* in his right mind could resist. And that is what Padmarag would have become - a novel of romance, love and domesticity in the genre of social/familial/romantic novels so popular in the day - had Rokeya allowed the matter to end there. Which she did not. Two things set the book apart. One, the nature of Tarini Bhaban and two, Siddika's stunning renunciation at the end.

For perhaps the most interesting feature of the novel is the moment of renunciation by Ayesha Siddika. When Latif her husband asked her to return to him Siddika declined the offer even though this was the moment she had been waiting for. She chose a life of independence over the longed for but perhaps illusory prospect of domestic bliss with Latif. The scene as described in *Padmarag*:

> Siddika: I had set my goal in life long ago... I understood
> God did not decree the life of a householder for me.
> Latif: I cannot take this as your last word. Do you have anything against me?
> S: No.
> L: Then will you be my wife? Guardian of my home and hearth?
> S: No. You most go your way and I mine.

Latif was quite the 'Renaissance' man - educated, enlightened, romantic - drawn in the image of the Muslim bhadrolok who was making his appearance on the scene at the turn of the century. Was *this* Ayesha quite the 'new woman', crystallized and reflected in literature? Partly yes and partly no. Siddika was indeed the new woman - but her renunciation of domestic life went much beyond, actually against, the creed of the *bhadromohila*.

To the *bhadromohila* in fiction and in reality the home was to be a cherished goal - its preservation one of her sacred duties. This duty was now

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

no longer supposed to be an oppressive burden imposed by patriarchy, but an integral part of a partnership (matrimony) willingly gone into. At least that was what the new ideology of the domestic, proclaimed. And sure enough Siddika, a few pages later, brooded over recent events and told herself that a husband was a wife's most precious asset. But she persevered in her decision to remain alone. In the closing pages Ayesha provided a political reason for her decision: she wanted the world to know that *some* women at least would not allow themselves to be treated like puppets whose fates could be played with.

Why did Rokeya resort to this ambivalence in her only novel where other fictional texts of the period upheld domestic ideology? Fiction allows a certain liberty which reality does not. Siddika's was a rare and lonely choice (fiction was the site where this choice could be made) - a skillful subversion in fact of the vision of domestic bliss the *bhadromohila* saw in front, from the pen of the most rational female writer of the wider Bengal Renaissance.

If the image of the 'new woman' seems elusive that is because it was. It meant different things to different people situated at different points. It varied across class and culture and time. Within the same class and time frame it could vary across discursive domains. There was **not** one new woman as emphasized above, but **several** - and one could not arrive at an average. What all shared in common was a particular newness. In some manner - in education, taste, ideals, attitudes, expectation, behavior - they were different from those who came before.

As for the reflection of the new woman in literature, Martha Vicinus' observation about women's fiction of a different society altogether, seems surprisingly apt in the context of Bengali women:

So often concerned with love, courtship and marriage, fiction rarely

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dealt with the growing complexity of women's sphere. Despite these seeming limitations Victorian literature functioned as both an expression and a shaper of the culture and its conflicts. For many men and women reading... was a means of managing the emotional ambivalences they felt in regard to their changing roles. Art gave order and understanding of the conflicting demands placed upon individuals.[42]

[42]Martha Vicinus, *A Widening*, Introduction p.XII.

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CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSION

The traditional role of Muslim women was greatly transformed by the early twentieth century. Between the times of Faizunnessa (1834-1903) and Fazilatunnessa (1905-1976), a new type of social personality, the *bhadromohila* was born. This transformation occurred within a broader cultural process: Bengalicization[1] which implied a new mode of gentrification whereby the traditional *shurafa* made way for the middle class *bhadro sampraday*. The complex change in the social structure of colonial Bengal had various ramifications - economic, political, religious and cultural.

The world of Muslim women in Bengal changed visibly. Women were no longer dwellers of the *andarmahal* only. They now had access to education, their role within the home assumed new forms. Their relationship in marriage and perception of domesticity, motherhood and love, underwent change as well, as did the ideology circumscribing all of these. Equipped with a new ability to articulate, women now started to express themselves in writing and were soon to embark, in limited measure, upon jobs and careers, the very respectable ones at first. The context, i.e., the historical (material and ideological) canvas on which the great changes affecting the modern Muslim gentlewomen, was etched out, has been reviewed briefly in

[1]Linear progressions of cause and effect are quite inadequate in analyzing the phenomenon of cultural/social change described in this study. But the change was undoubtedly linked to factors such as the rise of the middle class and the new economy in a colonized country, entry into the professions, new education, urbanization, etc. - factors which fall outside the scope of this work and are taken as given parameters.

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the first chapter to their unfolding story.

The structures of the traditional family and life in the *andarmahal* has been traced in the second chapter. A distorted notion of seclusion designed to control women's sexuality coupled with the fact that upper class women had no economic or social role in the public domain, led to a total separation of the public and private spheres in sharif society.

But no form of power and control is isolated from resistance to it which generates in its turn an impetus to change. The third chapter picked up the narrative thread from the beginning of the twentieth century, when existing family structures started to break down as they came under the pressure of a new set of economic and ideological factors. The development of a middle class salariat that had prepared itself through 'western' education, and the gradual replacement of the landed gentry with a professional one necessitated new familial arrangements. Exposure to the ideas of post enlightenment Europe and a desire to appear 'modern' and 'civilized' vis-a-vis the status of women, made the Muslim gentry question existing structures and relationships - polygamy, child marriage, concubinage and the subservience of woman to her in-laws, etc. All of this took place within the rise of a new domestic ideology with its roots partially at least in Victorian England. This new ideology had circumscribed the lives of Brahmo women in an earlier age . Reform measures reflected the change in mentality regarding women's role in the family. As the family was the most important domain in a woman's life (perhaps the only one) the changes affected women profoundly and acted as a great catalyst in producing the new *bhadromohila* who gradually replaced the traditional mistress (usually mother in law) of the upper class home. The third chapter addressed the family as it adjusted to the new economic and cultural order and became the site of a great transformation.

Education was the great battle ground for reformers in the early part

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of the twentieth century. By the second decade society had more or less accepted the fact that girls would go out of the home for education. Most sources attest that female education started becoming popular around or after 1911-12. Creation of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam gave an impetus to a social phenomenon already in the making. Unlike the home, education was an area where government could play a well defined role through its politics of promotion or indifference.

The slowly developing measures of the local population were often accelerated by governmental policy intervention expressed through various specific reform measures such as setting up schools or colleges, funds for scholarships etc. By 1939, the two schools set up by the pioneers, Rokeya and Faizunnessa were full fledged high schools recognized and managed by the colonial government. Female attendance at educational institutions in the province of Bengal increased. It was in the second decade also that women started pursuing higher education. Vernacular education in schools explicitly for Muslim girls meant Urdu as the medium of instruction. But Bengali assumed importance as *Sharif Hindustani Bibiyan* were transformed into the Muslim *bhadromohila*. In schools such as Eden, Khastagir Bidyamoyee and Bethune, Bengali was the 'medium' but English was given sufficient emphasis. Respectable families sent their daughters to the various institutions according to their class, culture and tastes. In this hybrid situation, the Bengalicized Muslim gentlewoman the *bhadromohila* was born and soon became the dominant stereotype of the middle class.

No topic generated as much discourse as education. Contemporary periodicals carried articles on the subject from 1903 onwards, but the debates intensified in the 20s and 30s which was concomitant with the spread of female education. The fourth and fifth chapters of the present thesis dealt with the educational aspect of the *bhadromohila*'s emergence. The reformers and publicists were divided into three broad (and overlapping) stands on

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the issue of female education - mainly over the mode, content, level and objectives. The centrists and liberals won the day. They performed a task of cultural mediation - in rationalizing religion and liberalizing its tenets in the light of modern day principles. They thus bridged the gap between tradition and modernity, paving the way for reform. This reform had its limitations which were similar to those of reformist projects advocated by the Brahmo and Hindu *bhadrolok*. Education was seen as an end in itself - or at best as a means to the making of the good housekeeper, wife and mother. It must be remembered though that the reformers were working not in a country which was enjoying cultural and economic continuity, but one "in which the development process itself was subverted by the advent of colonization."[2]

Education was the visible hallmark of the *bhadromohila* and literature was her medium of self-expression. These were the two areas where she participated, outside the realm of the domestic. But where education required a literal 'stepping out' of the home, literary activity involved only an imaginary one. Thus women who could not attend school because of purdah, were free to write (so long as their literary product conformed to patriarchal codes). Like her Brahmo/Hindu predecessor the Muslim *bhadromohila* was quite prolific in literary output. The period was rich with women's writings - from those who wrote an occasional poem to those who took up writing as careers. Through literature women gained access to the classical works of the Bengal Renaissance. The act of reading and writing also formed the participatory link between these diverse worlds.

The women wrote out of their own urge - but in the process they left behind an important testament of those times - the critical social issues

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[2]Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed "Historical Roots of the Women's Reform Movement A Period of Awakening 1896-1917", in *Finding Our Way, Readings on Women in Pakistan*, (Lahore: ASR, 1991), pp.5-6.

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which touched their lives - as seen from their vantage point. Thus a scan of contemporary literary material produced during the period - fiction and non fiction - enabled us to both reconstruct the times as well as the person who was viewing those times.

Where non-fictional literature was a direct source on the history of the period; fictional literature enabled us to penetrate to a zone beyond the apparent - i.e. to the idealized version of the *bhadromohila* in the social psyche or more accurately the new woman as she emerged in the pages of contemporary literature. This idealized woman claimed many renditions - and the images varied with each writer and in each text. The last two chapters explored the cultivation of literary activity by Muslim women, and the images of the women themselves as constructed in creative writing. Some of the characteristics that emerged in popular and not so popular writings were concrete in some respects and elusive and shifting in others. The chapters as a whole traced the *bhadromohila*'s emergence in different spheres - the simultaneous process of how she came into being and how she was constructed. The emergence of the *bhadromohila* coincided with and partially produced and was produced, by the *nari jagaran* (women's awakening).

However limited the scope of *bhadrolok* reform, or women's participation in it, however fragmented the area of its application, the period was marked by a significant change of mentality which warrants the label *nari jagaran*. It is difficult to delineate cut-off points in time, to say when exactly the *jagaran* (awakening) ended and a concerted movement began. A recent scholar has termed the late nineteenth century as a period of awakening which phased into the early 20th century movement.[3]

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[3]Maleka Begum, *Banglar Nari Andolan*, (Bengali), (The Women's Movement in Bengal), (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1989), pp.57, 58, 66.

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There were many references by contemporary writers to the *nari jagaran*. In her essay 'Sesame Phak' (1918), the usually sceptical Rokeya expressed her satisfiction at the signs of awakening all around:

> ... it is heartening that we hear much discourse on female education all around us. Girl's schools are being set up everywhere in cities towns and villages. Muslim women's association (samiti) and ladies clubs have sprung up all over. Last year there was an allotted section for *purdahnashin mohilas* [sic] at the Muhammadan Educational Conference. Our brothers have understood "India will not rise, if Indian women do not awaken".[4]

In 1926, *Shikha* published from Dhaka by the progressives of the Muslim Sahitya Samaj, carried an article tilled "Amader Nabajagaran O Shariat" (Our Awakening and Scriptual Law). It discussed, in rather a conservative tone, the social evils of seclusion, ignorance etc., on the one hand and those of indiscriminate 'westernization' on the other and enjoined a cautious liberalization.

In 1929, Saogat published three articles which referred more directly to the phenomenon of the *jagaran*. The first, Fazilatunnessa's piece was titled 'Muslim Narir Mukti' and she gave her views on what the word meant to her: "The word mukti implies emancipation of one's inner self. To render one's independent self to the world and to society and be regulated by the dictates of one's own reason - that is freedom of self."[5] By 1929 the *bhadromohila* was in a position to declare herself in the pages of popular periodicals. In a subsequent issue of *Saogat*, Nurjahan wrote "Banga Muslim Nari Jagaran" (The Bengal Muslim Women's Awakening) - where she raised

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[4]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, "Sesame Phak", *RR*, pp. 260-261.

[5]Fazilatunnessa, "Muslim Narir Mukti", *Saogat*, 7:1, 1-2, Bhadro 1336 BS (Mohila Issue).

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issues such as seclusion, and employment. In a review of Nurjahan's article in the following issue, titled simply "Nari Jagaran" Abul Fazl pointed out that Kumari [sic] Nurjahan had raised the issue of *aborodh* and its abolition. That women themselves were posing these questions, proved their agency, Fazl concluded.

Shamsunnahar Mahmud also referred to the signs of '*nari jagaran*' all around her in her most famous book, the biography of Rokeya, and in other articles. Both as a contemporary and a later scholar evaluating those times, Nahar viewed the 1920s-40's as a definite period of stir and activity and heightened consciousness.

For scholars standing at this end of the twentieth century and turning their gaze to times lapsed more than half a century ago, it is a little easier to see the period as part of a greater whole. It *was* a time of *jagaran* for women, a time of emergence, if awakening is taken to mean 'coming into existence from a prior dormant state'. The handful of historians who have turned their gaze in that direction, perceive the period in the terms outlined above. Mujeer uddin, one of the first to write on women's writings, places Nurunnessa in "the times when Begum Rokeya had launched her movement for women's awakening",[6] though he admits that the movement had touched only a few. Other scholars and researchers - Anisuzzaman, Maleka Begum, Shahanara Hossain, Shahida Parveen and Wakil Ahmed, for example - have all used the term to describe that age while reconstructing its literature, history, culture and polity.

In reviewing that period from 1876 to 1939, one is struck by the "great silence" on many matters of importance. Some questions were never asked, some feelings were never voiced in that age so ripe with words. What was education for beyond the abstract and moral good of the woman, beyond

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[6]Prof. Mujeer Uddin, *Bangla Sahitye Muslim Mohila*, p.76.

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equipping her with sound domestic proficiency? What was woman's sexual nature realy like, if it existed ? A few, like Rokeya, had dared to border on these questions, others had couched them in euphemism. The significant point is not that we standing at this edge of time, would think up these queries, ponder at the answers, or wonder if they were or could be asked. What matters is whether they wanted to ask them.

Just as the women's reform movement and the forging of the new social entity - the *bhadromohila* may be viewed within the broader context of modernization/Bengalicization - the *nari jagoron* may be located in another social process, the movement from private to public patriarchy. Though the origins of the patriarchal relegation of women to the private sphere and men to the public, are unclear and debated, by the nineteenth century, in some societies such as Britain, the division had "hardened into a truism". As one scholar points out:

> Men had become associated with what was public: the workplace, politics, religion in its institutional forms, intellectual and cultural life, and in general terms, the exercise of power and authority; women, with what was private: the home, children, domestic life, sexuality...[7]

Some scholars maintain that the private/public dichotomy has been the chief manifestation and mechanism for maintaining patriarchal inequality. Patriarchy itself, as an all-embracing umbrella construct, has been perceived as having taken on or operated through many forms and shifts. One form that engaged scholars (particularly in the 1980s) is the dichotomous 'private-public' model.

Private patriarchy, broadly speaking, is based upon the household with the patriarch presiding over all female members, in the privacy of the

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[7]Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984), p.20.

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home. Public patriarchy is based upon "sites other than the household, although this may still be a significant patriarchal site."[8] In this regard Sylvia Walby studying the private-public shift with reference to British history, has remarked on its development in the nineteenth century:

> Recent British history has seen a movement towards the private model, and then a movement away to the public form. The height of the private form was to be found in the middle of the 19th century in the middle classes.Many scholars have agreed that there was an intensification in the domestic ideology, and the extent to which middle class women were confined to the private sphere of the home.[9]

Walby further points out that British history is experiencing a still-continuing trend to the public form which began with women's entry into the paid work force. The movement from one form to the other, she maintains, had two moments - one located at the turn of the last century, the other in the post Second World War period. The capitalist demand for labour (which had intensified after the war) and 'First Wave Feminist" activity, were instrumental in this process.

With respect to colonial Bengal in the period under review, the model above has some applicability, though of a limited and modified nature. As depicted in chapters II and III, women of the emergent middle class at the turn of the last century, were in a form of private patriarchy at a time when the private-public or *ghar-bahir* axis itself was being constructed.In Bengal, the notion of two distinct spheres also crystallized in the nineteenth century. Middle class women started gaining limited access to

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[8] Sylvia Walby, "From Private to Public Patriarchy. The Periodisation of British History", in *Women's studies International Forum*, vol. 13, nos. 1/2, p.94

[9].ibid. p. 94

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the *bahir*, but waged work was denied them. But are we justified in carrying the analogy further with regard to Bengali women in identifying a similar movement from one to the other in the colony? In other words, were Bengali women experiencing a similar construction of the private and public *and* erosion of its distance, as Victorian/Edwardian women? If we proceed with caution and keep sight of the diverse cultural and material differences, for we are talking of two disparate groups of women in the final analysis, we amy answer in a limited affirmative.

Access to education and training, and later employment, reform in legal status in the family and outside, a widening platform for political activity - all combined to bring about a deep-rooted change in women's world through the creation of the *bhadromohila*. A cogent, apparent and historically concrete ground for comparability of Victorian/Edwardian and Colonial Bengali women was the phenomenon of 'First Wave Feminism':

> First-wave feminism was a large, multi-faceted, long-lived and highly effective political phenomenon. It can be dated as extending from around 1850 to about 1930. It contained a wide range of political positions... evangelical feminism, socialist feminism, materialist feminism, and radical feminism, as well as liberal feminism.[10]

It is in the nature and the objective of this feminist movement that the linkages between the British and Bengali - Brahmo and Muslim - models are discernible. At the same time it must be pointed out that this is only an analogy and a broad one at that - valid only from a distance far enough to blur incongruencies. In respect of the time frame alone, for instance, the three categories of women stand apart - British women started experiencing modernization from the early nineteenth century, Brahmo women

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[10]ibid.p.97. It is interesting that Geraldine Forbes wrote an essay on the Brahmo/Hindu *bhadromohila* in the early decades of this Century, titled "Caged Tigers: First Wave Feminists in India".

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from the middle of the century and the Muslim women from the first decades of the twentieth century. Mary Wollstonecraft published *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792; Pandita Ramabai created a sensation in Calcutta in 1878 by discoursing with *pandits* in Sanskrit; and it took a Rokeya Sakhawat to expound a clear feminist theory in the 1920s. Nevertheless, this much may be safely said: In the 1940s, a Brahmo *bhadromohila*, a Muslim *bhadromohila* and an English lady sitting together around a cup of tea or in a picketing line would have much ultimately to say to each other - much in terms of territory gained or lost in their struggle for 'emancipation'.[11]

In terms of territory gained or lost by women, let us invoke the platitude: Every age must be judged by its own standard and evaluated by its own criteria. The words of another scholar studying the lives of Victorian women, come to mind:

> How women affected change from within male prescribed roles, how they redefined their status, in some areas (such as education) and lost in others (such as social production), are all important aspects of how we should place the Victorian woman in her proper - but changing sphere.[12]

It is interesting that the first book edited by Martha Vicinus was titled "Suffer and Be Still. Women in the Victorian Age". The cover for the paperback edition showed a Victorian seamstress in a dimly lit and cheerless room bending wearily over her work. However, the sequel to this was titled "A Widening Sphere Changing Roles of Victorian Women."

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[11]Rokeya translated an English piece "The Murder of Delicia" into Bengali, proclaiming that she had set out to expose the universal nature of women's oppression, East or West, rich or poor. See Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Delicia Hatya*, in R.R.

[12]Martha Vicinus, Introduction, in Vicinus (ed), *A Widening.*

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And that is perhaps the best that can also be said of the Bengali women whose lives, mentalities and circumstances we have attempted to study - those who participated, first in the construction of the *ghar and bahir*, and later, in the erosion of its distance.

Coming to more indigenous art forms, it will be remembered (see Chap. III, section on dress) that through the 1920s the Women's page of *Saogat* was titled *Zanana Mahfil* (Women's Gathering), where the logo written in Bengali in a pseudo-Persian font showed the inside of a house laid out in Persian/ North Indian style with curtains, carpets and pitchers, and a group of women in Persianized attire (dopatta, gharara, kameez, etc.), chatting on the carpet. In 1940 the journal changed its caption altogether: The Urdu *Zanana Mahfil* was now replaced by the Bengali caption *Mohila Jogot* (Women's World). Instead of veiled women in a room, we have a woman in a sari - her hair, now visible, coiled into a bun - the edge of her sari flying in the air. And the woman is at the steering wheel of a car. She had stepped from the *Zenana mahfil* to the *Mohila Jogot* - a woman's world yes, but one under the open sky. Zobeda and Monowara took their place alongside Ashalata and Anupoma - the modern, urban dwelling, middle-class *Muslim bhadromohila had emerged.*

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Dhaka University Institutional Repository

APPENDIX

SELECTED LIST OF BHADROMOHILAS DISCUSSED/INTERVIEWED
(Arranged Chronologically)

Name of the Bhadromohila & Dates (birth-death)	*Education Level & Career*	*Age at Marriage*	*Husband's Name & Profession*
Faizunnessa Chaudhurani 1834-1903	*Home education. Philanthropist, writer*	27	Mahmud Ghazi *Landlord*
Karimunnessa Khanam 1855-1926	*Home education. Housewife*	14	Ghaznavi *Landlord*
Khujista Akter Bano ≈1878-1919	*Senior Cambridge. Social worker*	16	Zahid Suhrawardy *Barrister*
Rokeya S. Hossein 1880-1932	*Home education. Writer, education-ist, social worker*	16/18	Sakhawat Hossein *Govt service*
Malekunnessa 1885-1975	*Oral education. Housewife*	12	S. Khan *Govt service*
Sara Taifur 1888-1971	*Home education. Housewife, writer*	26	Syed M. Taifur *Writer*
Mamlukul Fatema Khanam 1894-1957	*Home education. Educationist, writer*	10	Ataur Rahman *Doctor* *Separated*
Nurunnessa Khatun 1894-1975	*Home education. Literary writer*	18	Kazi G. Mohammad *Lawyer*
Zobeda Khatun Choudhury 1901-1986	*Primary school. Politician*	18	Dewan Abdur Rahim Choudhury

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Name of the Bhadromohila & Dates (birth-death)	*Education Level & Career*	*Age at Marriage*	*Husband's Name & Profession*
Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun 1901-1929	*Home education. Writer*	12	Mahbubul Huq *Landlord*
Asema Khatun ≈1903-1986	*Home education. Housewife*	14	Nurul Huda Choudhury *Govt service, teacher*
Zulikha Bano 1904-1974	*B.A. Housewife*	23	K. G. Murshed *Govt service, ICS*
Akhtarunnessa 1905	*Secondary school. Housewife*	17	Amanatullah *Govt service*
Fazilatunnessa 1905-1976	*M.A. Govt edu. service*	25?	Shamsuzzoha *Solicitor*
Mahmuda Khatun Siddika 1906-1977	*Secondary school. Writer*	12	*No information*
Razia K. Chaudhurani 1907-1934	*Home education. Writer*	18	Ashrafuddin A.Choudhury *Politician*
Afia Begum 1908	*Home education. Housewife*	12	Abdul H. Chowdhury *Govt service*
Shamsunnahar Mahmud 1908-1964	*M.A. Govt edu. service, writer*	18	Wahiduddin Mahmud *Doctor*
Rokeya Khatun 1908	*Home education. Housewife*	14	Nafazuddin Khan *Govt service*
Syeda Monowara Khatun 1909-1981	*Home education. Housewife*	15	Syed Taher Ali *Govt service*

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Name of the Bhadromohila & Dates (birth-death)	*Education Level & Career*	*Age at Marriage*	*Husband's Name & Profession*
Sufia Kamal 1911	*Home education.* *Poet, social worker*	12 a) 28 b)	a) S. N. Hossain b) Kamaluddin Ahmed Khan *Govt service*
Tohfatunessa Azim 1913-1983	*Home education.* *Housewife, editor, social worker*	10	Anwarul Azim *Barrister*
Shaista Ikramullah 1915	*Ph.D.* *Politician, writer*	18	Ikramullah *Govt service*
Aqiqunnessa Ahmad ≈1916	*Home education.* *Writer*	10	Abul Mansur Ahmad *Politician, writer*
Lutfunnessa Abbas 1917	*Home education.* *Housewife*	15	Abbasuddin *Singer, Govt service*
Syeda Jahanara Hyder 1917-1988	*B.A.* *Social worker*	20	A.B.Saifuddin Hyder *Advocate*
Akhtar Imam 1917	*M.A.* *Teacher (Govt edu service)*	20	Ali Imam *Univ. Teacher*
Khodeja Khatun 1919-90	*M.A.* *Govt edu service*	25	M. H. Khan *Lawyer*
Fatema Khatun (Hasib) 1918-1968	*Home education.* *Housewife*	16	Abu M. M. Hasib *Govt service*
Hamida Bano 1918-1992	*Primary school.* *Housewife*	14	Mofizuddin Ahmed *Govt service*

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Name of the Bhadromohila & Dates (birth-death)	*Education Level & Career*	*Age at Marriage*	*Husband's Name & Profession*
Fatema Sadeq 1918	*Ph.D. University Teacher*	18	Abdus Sadeq *Univ. Teacher*
Hajera Khatun (Shukoor) 1919	*Home education. Housewife*	11	Abdus Shukoor *Govt service*
Afifa Huq 1919	*B.A. Housewife*	25	Azizul Huq *Politician*
Anwara Bahar 1919-1987	*M.A. Govt edu service, social worker*	19	Habibullah Bahar *Politician, journalist*
Zobeda Khanam 1920-1990	*M.A. Govt edu service*	14	Abdur Rahim *Doctor*
Syeda Latifa Mahmud ≈1920	*Home education. Housewife*	24	Abu Naser Mohammad *Govt service*
Nurun Nahar ≈1920-1992	*Primary school. Housewife*	17	Kazi Elhamul Huq *Govt service*
Mehrunnessa Islam 1921	*M.A. Govt edu service*	25	M. Nurul Islam *Govt service*
Umratul Fazl 1922	*Home education. Housewife, social worker*	16	Abul Fazl *Teacher, writer*
Daulatunnessa Khatun 1922	*Primary school. Writer, social worker*	8	Hafizur Rahman *Doctor*
Hamida Khatun Salauddin 1923	*M.A. Govt edu service*	20	A.F. Salahuddin *Univ. Teacher*

Dhaka University Institutional Repository

Name of the Bhadromohila & Dates (birth-death)	*Education Level & Career*	*Age at Marriage*	*Husband's Name & Profession*
Hamida Rahman 1923	*B.A. (incomplete)* *Writer*	19	Siddikur Rahman *Govt service*
Selina Hasib 1923	*B.A.* *Housewife*	15	Syed Abdul Hasib *Advocate*
Zubaida Mirza 1923-1993	*M.A.* *Govt edu service*	20	M. Abdul Sattar *Univ.Teacher*
Noorjehan Murshed 1924	*B.A.* *Politician*	24	Sarwar Murshed *Univ. teacher*
Nurjehan Begum 1925	*B.A.* *Journalist*	27	Roqunuzzaman *Journalist*
Rokeya Kabir 1925	*M.A.* *Teacher,* *social worker*	21	Feroz Kabir *Businessman* *Separated*
Rahima Khatun 1925	*Home education.* *Writer*	17	Kazi A. Munim *Govt service*
Atia Huq 1925	*M.A.* *Teacher*	21	Aminul Huq *Govt service*
Sultana Islam 1925	*B.A.* *Housewife,* *social worker*	19	A.F.M.Shamsul Islam *Govt service*
Aziza Idris 1926	*Secondary school.* *Housewife,* *politician*	14	Kazi M. Idris *Journalist,* *editor, writer*