



RESEARCH PAPER

Muslim Women's Agency and South Asian Literature: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis of Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household by Iqbalunnisa Hussain

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ABSTRACT

The study Muslim Women's Agency and South Asian Literature aims at exploring the aspects of Muslim women's oppression and seclusion in the life of *zenana* with reference to the selected work *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944) by Iqbalunnisa Hussain. Hussain is celebrated as the pioneer of Muslim Anglophone literature in South Asia. She is considered as the first female writer to stand against the oppressive practices like polygamy and seclusion of Indian Muslim women. Women authors and their literature have played a vital role in reflecting the oppressive states of women at the hands of insensitive conventional and patriarchal cultural values of colonial India. The selected novel is examined through Spivak's perspective of voiceless subaltern. The study concludes that the patriarchal hegemony and subjugation are the factors, preventing Muslim women's agency.

KEYWORDS Agency, Muslim Women, *Zenana*, Patriarchal Oppression, Resistance

Introduction

In the Postcolonial context, women authors and their writings are extremely important as they play a significant role in the history of Postcolonial Literature of third-world countries. Colonial female subject is always reflected with deep penetration in the writings of women in the backdrop of colonial invasion. The reflection of marginalised yet resisting female characters in the writings of South Asian women has been remained a defining moment for Muslim women who have been fighting the boundaries being exerted upon them in the name of religion and culture. Writers of South Asian colonial and Postcolonial literature preserve the essential cultural assets of Muslim households of the colonial Subcontinent. The reflection of Muslim women living in that era abound in oppression elaborates a great deal about women's agency at that time.

The necessity of women's voices is even more critical due to the colonial subjects' agency and marginalisation in the subcontinent before its independence. The colonial exposure of third-world women is crucial in describing the lives of colonised women after European rulers invaded their territories and customs. The perspective of women in colonised nations emerges as a necessity to be addressed and accepted in the context of cultural uproar.

Throughout the colonial era, women authors made potential attempts to write not just for nationalist purposes but also in efforts to give voice to society's severely oppressed

and subjugated women. The voice opposing colonial encounters had never faced prejudice before, but colonial India's escalating conflicts and tension between Hindus and Muslims exhibited that it was a double-edged sword for the country's mixed-race people. Therefore, being conscious of the emerging tensions, women writers of the period strived to preserve their social, religious, and cultural values through their works. Iqbalunnisa Hussain is one of those pioneer figures of Muslim women's representatives. She is the first women's rights activist and writer of colonial India to raise voice against Muslim women's oppression and segregation within the typical Muslim setups of *zenana*.

Known as Taslima Nasreen in Bangladesh, Iqbalunnisa Hussain was a pre-independence Indian English Muslim intellectual (Begum, 2021). She rebelled against the unethical actions of the Indian Muslim community. Her best-known work, *Purdah and Polygamy* (1944), is a strong condemnation of the exploitative practices of *purdah* and polygamy. Before 1947, Iqbalunnisa Hussain became the first Muslim lady from the south of India to write in English. She was from the state of Karnataka and was born on January 21, 1900, into a patriotic family in Chikkaballapur, a town close to Bangalore. Her parents encouraged her to take all the foreign language classes she could, particularly English which she learned from a female instructor. Since she was a little girl, she developed a fascination with the English language.

In 1914, at the age of 14, she got married to Sayed Ahmed Hussain. He was an engineering student in Bombay. Iqbalunnisa pursued her education while residing in Bangalore. She completed her intermediate in 1922. She and her older son Bashiruzaman were both enrolled at Maharani College in Mysore to pursue B.A. degrees. At commencement, the mother and son both got medals. Her husband then sent both her and his eldest son to the University of Leeds in England in 1933, making her the pioneer Muslim Karnatakan lady to graduate from the University of Leeds.

These explorations and successes provided Iqbalunnisa Hussain with a distinctive viewpoint regarding the female sex in Muslim society. She committed her life to social work and fought for the acceptance of widows and divorced women in the community. She actively advocated for people to send their girls to school and was a fervent defender of girls' empowerment. On the other side, the orthodox Muslims did not respond as they ought to have. Their attitude was quite irreconcilable. Iqbalunnisa Hussain was commonly viewed in her community as a deviant. Numerous people did not agree with her liberal beliefs or practices. Iqbalunnisa Hussain is hence said to be "our last significant social author" (Sarma, 1978, p. 133).

After finishing her study at Leeds, Iqbalunnisa Hussain served as a teaching assistant at Vani Vilas High School in Bangalore. She then progressed to the position of Head Mistress at a regional Urdu school. She toured the nation advocating programs for women's well-being and education with Kamamma and Nanjamma, two social activists from Bangalore's Mahila Seva Samaj. She visited Hindu pilgrimage centres, Haridwar and Banaras while disguising herself as a Hindu lady.

When Iqbalunnisa Hussain abandoned putting *purdah* in 1931, her life altered. It was a daring move. The whole Muslim community was outraged by Iqbalunnisa Hussain's daring behaviour. People debated putting her on fire and produced articles disparaging her character. She, however, remained rigid. Her husband stood up for her as a companion and thinker. Iqbalunnisa Hussain was a skilled journalist and social activist. She had many friends in the academic world. She founded a handicraft centre for orphans and widows in 1931. Her first girl, Malika Hussain, also studied in that centre.

She progressed in her struggle for women's rights, routinely releasing writings in the English-language media. These writings were eventually included in the 1940 publication "Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks." Four years later, her novel *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944) was released. Hussain's feminism and her personal experience serve as evidence that the campaign for equality between men and women has a deep and long historical background rather than being a recent phenomenon or a European concept.

One of the most comprehensive and extensive criticisms of patriarchy in the subcontinent may be found in *Purdah and Polygamy* (1944). It is a fascinating book for many reasons, but perhaps chief among them is the notion that it is one of the earliest complete works of fiction in English written by a Muslim woman in joint India. Hussain considered it a rebellious deed since Indian Muslims detested the concept of girls learning and writing in English. *Purdah and Polygamy* are examples of the conservatism of Muslim men. True religious customs and practices that benefit mankind have no place in our society. Liberal and conservative organisations within religions are often split into these two categories. Islam is held as part of the second category. Being exploited like animals renders women unable to resist purdah and polygamy like they are caught by an octopus (Begum, 2021, p. 282).

Polygamy and Purdah are examples of social idealism. The Muslim family at the centrepiece of the narrative lives in the middle of an unidentified Indian town. This spatial allusion doesn't matter much because most of the event takes place inside the "huge blind walls" of the family's home, known as *Dilkusha*. The owner of the property, Umar, holds his bride Zuhra and the rest of his family on a minute restriction. He has kept Zuhra sequestered behind the rigid boundaries of *purdah* and barred her from participating in the family's economic matters. The remainder of the story is focused on Zuhra and her son's relationship as they manipulate to keep control of their separate realms through a convoluted web of deceptions that are constructed by everyone in the home, especially by Kabeer's four wives.

Ever since the 1940s, when the book was originally published, the practice of polygamy has somewhat dropped. Regulations on *purdah* have also been softened, particularly in large cities. However, the fundamental aspects of patriarchy, such as the economic and financial exploitation of women, their inferior position in households, the limitations on their right to freedom, and restrictions for education, and occupation, were continued to be in play.

Literature Review

There has always been a strong connection between feminism and colonization. Around a number of crucial topics, where feminism and post-colonialism converge, powerful challenges to dominant western conceptions of development are posed. Up until the 1980s, there was a propensity to think that women's marginalisation and activism took identical shapes all across the world. Feminists in the West believed that their dogmatic cause was general and that female agencies everywhere experienced the same kind of oppression. But differences amongst women depending on their colour, nationality, religion, class, area, sexual orientation, and language, have proven to be more polarising both within and between countries than western thinkers agreed or predicted. Abstractly speaking, a variety of arguments falling under the broad category of post-colonialism have challenged assumptions made by white feminists regarding their civil aim. Meetings with various feminist and western-centric political visions are not satisfactory anymore due to encounters with various feminisms and gender norms that have generated questions about

the aim of feminist agency. Black feminists, in particular, have studied how feminism has historically been positioned in dominant western discourses since the 1980s (McEwan, 2001, p. 96). Because feminism is a product of western cultural politics, it reflects western understandings of sexual politics and gender relations. Feminism is associated with identity politics in many nations, particularly in the South (p. 97).

The critical viewpoint of postcolonial feminism challenges inequalities caused by hegemonic power relations by examining the relationship between the occidents and orientals as well as questioning postcolonial gender norms. In addition to emphasising patriarchy as an oppressive force, postcolonial feminism also looks at how social injustices are situated in and created by governmental, social, historical, and economic considerations (Al-Wazedi, 2021, p. 155).

How would it feel to be the target of extensive subjugation? The victim of the ongoing abuse eventually gives in. Additionally, if there are two degrees of victimisation, the victim is rendered helpless to improve their situation. The victim becomes damaged and scarred due to the repeated pounding. The post-colonial upheaval affects someone similarly. Postcolonial feminism examines how Muslim women in South-Asian colonised nations are treated following decolonization (Varghese, 2019, p. 79).

The notion that the South Asian woman is often defined in connection with others, and most notably in regard to her men folks, has long been emphasised by South Asian women authors. South Asian women authors have repeatedly underlined the problems faced by women as they attempt to identify themselves and gain more liberty while upholding conventional morals, familial obligations, and even misconceptions about what it means to be a woman. To provide their female characters with the ability to define themselves, or at least, redefine themselves, the majority of modern South Asian women authors have highlighted the uniqueness of women in their writings. Numerous South Asian women authors, meanwhile, also portray their female agency as sufferers in their society, which almost seems to connect women's very status with that of double marginalisation (Jia, 2002, p. 9).

Iqbalunnisa Hussain made a valiant effort to depict the tides and tensions of an ordinary Muslim family in her work *Purdah and Polygamy; Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944). *Purdah* and polygamy are the two vices that must be eradicated from conventional Muslim culture, as the title of the piece indicates. The protagonist of the novel, Kabeer, marries four wives primarily to gratify his carnal desires while taking full advantage of the religious approval. The writer has also depicted how the mother-in-law is a terrible despot; how the poor, weak, and vulnerable women are communally pressured to spend their entire existence behind the purdah; and how Akram, Kabeer's son, retaliates brutally against the hidebound dogmas and outmoded traditions (Ansari, 2009).

Purdah and Polygamy (1944) by Hussain examines how societal and personal oppression of Muslim women subject affect them personally, as well as how cultural practices influence everyday activities and social norms. In a patriarchal culture like Pakistan, where male supremacy is justified, women confront obstacles and hardships. The work is a scathing indictment of the norms of Muslim or Pakistani culture, where most traditions are in accordance with social restrictions. Religion places a strong emphasis on girls' schooling, yet society often forbids women from being educated or being given authority. The novel's author masterfully presented the Muslim home from the very beginning to the end. However, there is a remarkable attempt to describe what Iqbalunnisa Hussain refers to as a societal aim by using a scathingly satirical perspective. In this book, polygamy is represented as the family's cultural and social conduct for a woman who acts

as a commentator, particularly in the current day when issues related to home economics, business, and spirituality are changing (Kanwal et al., 2021, p. 1).

Purdah and Polygamy (1944) revolves around the fate of Muslim women living in colonial and cultural oppression in Indian society and the youngsters who will decide whether to continue living as they have lived before or to go on to a different, more inclusive approach. Its verdict is undecided on that destiny. On the one side, there is Akram, the child of Kabeer and Nazni, who, after originally imitating his father's example and seeking social and sexual relationships with other women, starts to question the effects of his conduct on the women he loves. Apparently, as heavenly vengeance, Kabeer does experience horrific things. Yet Akram promises to take responsibility for his mother and her three wives. Maghbool too has a happy ending as he manages to flee the home. Nonetheless, there are hints towards the realisation that the power relationship will persist even with different individuals filling the roles of the conqueror and sufferer (Hubel, 2015, p.12).

The theoretical work designed for the exploration of the selected novel revolves around Spivak's domain of subaltern studies. In her renowned work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak explains the essence of the subaltern. She further explains that it is almost impossible for a subaltern to voice their concerns in an essentialist colonial setup. The voice of the subaltern remains unheard as the subaltern value systems are studied and perceived according to the western lens. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is an insightful work. Spivak explains the western way of observing and interpreting indigenous cultures. The title according to Raich is pretty broad and it explains that subaltern subject is not heard by the first world in respect of their cultural, ethnic, and gender differences (2017).

In this interview with Deleuze and Foucault, she concludes that it is not possible for subaltern communities to speak in the hegemony of colonial narratives. Spivak suggests a few strategies to deal with the dilemma in her later works. But Spivak advocates the subaltern cultural values as well as subaltern women's rights in an imperial setup. She proposes the idea to avoid studying the Postcolonial subject in the essential epistemological frame of reference. She believes that it is not possible for a subaltern to ever raise one's concern within the defined parameters of the West. Spivak suggests keeping in view the norms of suppressed and subaltern cultures and then a careful yet partial insight into indigenous' concerns is possible.

Spivak raises the question of the status of the narratives of subalterns in academia with her well-known work "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988) which carries her stance on the discourse of subalterns and subalternity in the light of Foucault's works regarding knowledge and power. This idea of Spivak leads to the notion of what she actually wants to convey that subaltern cannot speak. She has discussed the idea in detail in her work *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). Spivak's critics elaborate her observation of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" into a simple yet concluding notion that the subaltern simply cannot speak on his/her own. Spivak shows a special interest in the feminist cause. She has a lot of her theoretical perspectives to be observed in this regard.

Spivak has made a considerable sum of debate on another related concept. The idea of Strategic Essentialism is solely introduced for the survival of subaltern communities in an oppressive colonial setup where there it takes a lot to voice their concerns. The concept is misinterpreted by many scholars of the field but Spivak clarifies it by pointing to the logic of survival and regeneration. By Strategic essentialism, it means the partial acceptance of colonizers' essentialist generalizations about the local indigenous people just to dismantle these beliefs. Strategic Essentialism in other words can be taken as an act of

resistance which is based on some strategy to unmask the essentialist narrative about the subaltern and oppressed group of colonized regions.

Strategic Essentialism is a form of passive resistance to attain and sustain the desired cultural order. Subaltern women's passive resistance would make a significant contribution to develop a South Asian feminist agency. The analysis of the selected work by Iqbalunnisa Hussain shed light on the suffering of women in a doubly oppressed traditional Muslim household. In the selected work the representation of polygamous Muslim culture is portrayed with details during colonial times.

Discussion

In *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944) by Iqbalunnisa Hussain the major issues that are depicted as threatening to Muslim women's agency and causing subjugation and marginalization are Polygamy and seclusion of women inside *zenana*. Hussain's description of an Indian Muslim household is reflected in the lifestyle of a landlord Muslim family whose only male heir is Kabeer. After Kabeer's father Umar's death, his mother's only desire is to marry her son. Kabeer is described as a naïve young man, who is a careless and playful guy. It is said that "Reading always bored him and thinking gave him a headache." (Hussain, 1944, p.49). As an only child, he is spoiled by his mother's blind affection. Thanks to these attitudes, he has not acquired any formal academic degree. His family business and property are his future hopes. The management of the economic affairs is the responsibility of Mustafa who is a far-off relative of Kabeer's family. Mustafa works as Kabeer's assistant in his business as well as in his social dealings. The novel sketches a conventional patriarchal hegemonic order.

The physical settings of the house show a typical Muslim setup that divides between the outer side as *mardana* and the second half as *zenana*. Kabeer's family observes strict *purdah*. At the funeral of Kabeer's father Umar, the attitude of people towards the widow Zuhra (Kabeer's mother) shows a side of what Hussain perceives as an effect of living with Hindu culture. Kabeer's mother's bangles are taken by other women and she is made to wear a white outfit by force. She is confined in her room for observing her *iddat* (The period of four months and ten days to be observed by a Muslim woman in case of divorce or death of her husband according to Islamic norms). The additional white clothes and confinement in a room are not Islamic norms. The patriarchal mindset is represented when the dead body of Umar is kept for those women who do not observe *purdah* from his family as Hussain says, "after all a man is a man even dead, and *purdah* before him is essential" (p. 10). Zuhra considers herself worse than a stray dog as a widow without her husband. The forced seclusion of women and oppression in the name of cultural values prevent Muslim women to decide and live according to their own will and this is what actually proves as a threat to Muslim women's agency in the pre-partition colonial phase of India.

The attitude towards women is a bit derogatory. Umar considers women "being unreasonable creatures, could not be trusted in money matter" (p. 6). Umar's attitude towards his wife shows him as a miserly patriarchal figure. He does not give money to his wife because he deems it unnecessary. He only brings his wife's clothes in Ramadan when he brings food items for *Zakath* (Muslims' mode of charity). It is a common belief in the family that "no virtuous woman will step out of the house and will see no third person" (p. 6). The patriarchal figures like Umar do not contemplate women as capable enough to deal with daily life affairs on their own. To perform household chores, she only needs food to gain strength and clothes to cover her modesty.

Kabeer unlike his father is an extravagant man in the beginning. His mother's attitude of worshipping his manhood results in his carelessness, timidity and selfishness. But, like a typical male of a patriarchal culture, he perceives women only through their physical beauty considering them devoid of intellect and temperament. He, like his father, considers women as unreasonable creatures. According to him, "her only needs are food, clothing and decoration" (p. 24).

Kabeer's first marriage with Nazni; a young girl from an upper-class and comparatively modern Muslim family is so imperious and magisterial as it is about a matter of honour for both of the families. Nazni's father and her family possess modern thinking and allow women to go outside. They encourage Kabeer to take Nazni for a movie, an action strongly condemned by Kabeer's mother Zuhra. These liberal attitudes of Doulat Khan's family are considered threatening to the *zenana* culture of Kabeer's house. His second marriage with Munira is solely depicted on the basis of his physical pleasure and an unfulfilled desire of having a perfect woman. By a perfect woman, He means a woman who is meek, docile, and willing to serve her husband by all means. Her sole aim should be worshipping her husband as a demi-god. Nazni's heart disease provides him with a chance to bring another woman into his house. This new wife is brought from the slums to maintain control over her. Munira is a favourite to her mother-in-law while is always rejected by Kabeer because of her ordinary looks. Kabeer uses the titles like "negress" and "a woman from the gutter" for Munira because of her dark complexion and lower-class background.

Another aspect of women in the effects of the class system is highlighted in the novel when the matter of Kabeer's second marriage is broached. Munira, a girl from a comparatively average background with average looks which are considered ugly according to Kabeer and his mother, is brought as an 'unpaid', 'head servant' into the house. Munira, the new bride on the other hand, is a woman who is still happy about being entitled as a married woman, a blessing she thought impossible due to her looks. She believes in herself and thinks, "she would work for her husband like a Russian soldier and win him" (p. 50).

All the educated and modern characters including Nazni's father and brother, do not support Kabeer's polygamous household where women are quite insignificant and are kept in seclusion. According to them, by keeping more women in *the zenana*, Kabeer wants to assert his importance as the only patriarch of his family. They do not support Nazni's return to her husband. Yet the stigmatizing attitude of women in case of divorce prevents them to ask for "*khulah*." *Khulah* is the legal and religious way to ask for divorce by a woman in Islam. Hussain intends to explain the rights of women specified by Islam in this novel but the conventional patriarchal systems only choose such practices that facilitate them to marginalize Muslim women.

Kabeer's third marriage with Maghbool; an educated and modern Muslim girl who is fond of writing, singing and playing the piano, is actually to get solace from his second marriage with a woman from the slums. He feels sympathetic for himself for marrying an ordinary girl he does not deserve as a man of status and prestige. His eagerness to find a perfect woman never ends with Maghbool whom he considers his beloved wife in the early days of their marriage. He keeps his marriage secret from the rest of the women in his house including his mother Zuhra. As the only patriarch of his family, he does not think it essential to ask for permission from his wives. The traits of Maghbool which fascinated him initially become irritating and disgusting for him as, unlike other women, Maghbool does not respond to his naïve, romantic actions, and dialogues. She finds him a greedy and envious man.

An analysis of the suffering characters as subalterns exposes that all the Muslim women of Kabeer's household are not only suffering in the name of religion but because of the conventional value system and normative setup of high-class Indian Muslim families who observe the practices of women's seclusion in *zenana* and observance of *purdah*. Young, educated and modern women like Maghbool do not surrender. Maghbool tries to sustain living on her terms through the passive resistance of her male patriarch Kabeer. Her passive resistance is the sacrifice of her declared share of money from Kabeer's monthly income which is given to her as her wedding gift by Kabeer. Maghbool's passive resistance is actually a mode - Strategic Essentialism - defined by Spivak as a practice of subalterns to dismantle the colonial essentialist perspectives towards the colonized. She tries to attain her agency as a Muslim woman living in a typically conventional Polygamous Muslim household.

The colonial cultural encounter is also depicted in the characters of Alexander, Rose, and George. To Zuhra, the influence of Rose and Alexander on Kabeer's son Akram seems like a threat to their Muslim cultural values. She feels that the presence of Rose may darken the future of their Muslim family. George's manipulative role shows the crafty and shrewd side of the colonizer. His drastic plan to scare Akram leads to the traumatic death of Kabeer. This very aspect of the novel mirrors the end of Mir Nihal of *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) by Ahmad Ali where Mir Nihal's death shows the end of one regime and the beginning of the other. In *Purdah and Polygamy* (1944) by Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Kabeer's death and his modern son Akram's taking over of his legacy with inspiration from the English culture reflects the decline of conventional elite Muslim cultural setups.

After Kabeer's death, Maghbool, the rebellious wife, decides to take her share of his property and leaves the imposed seclusion of his house. She fights by showing passive resistance and wins, in the end, to live a life of her own choice by getting a share of Kabeer's property.

Conclusion

The downgrading of women in multiple ways including polygamous trends of Kabeer; imposed seclusion and subjugation of Muslim women in *zenana*; prevention of women from becoming financially independent; and considering them incapable of being intelligent and efficient to decide about the matters of money and business are the focal issues explored in the study. These oppressive aspects reflected by the selected work of Iqbalunnisa Hussain prevented Muslim women from developing a Muslim feminist agency in the time of colonial India.

Colonialism affects the situations of Muslim women in two ways: on one hand, the suppression of colonial invasion of the indigenous cultural values, and on the other hand, it also makes them to evolve with the changing times. The educated characters like Maghbool and her family believe in the empowerment of women. Maghbool wishes to be a literary figure and she tries to live on her own terms by writing for different magazines. Kabeer hates her and suppresses her financially due to her liberty of expression. She imparts reason in his other wives Nazni and Munira to think of them as significant as men. But the financial dependence of all the women compels them to suffer silently at the hands of their patriarch, Kabeer, who marries another young girl and keeps it secret until his death. Like Spivak's subalterns, women in the selected work have no voice of their own. Maghbool, the rebellious one, tries a passive resistance as discussed in Spivak's idea of Strategic Essentialism. Maghbool agrees with Kabeer and hands him over her share of the monthly rent of her property to get a chance of writing and publishing her ideas. She writes

poetry and finds herself alive in her works. Her radical act of expressing her ideas is actually an attempt towards the emergence of Muslim women's agency in colonial India.

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