

From Seclusion to Participation: Reform, Education, and Social Change

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Abstract:

This article repositions Muslim women, particularly Waheed Jahan, as active agents of late-colonial reform. It argues that through print culture and public debate, they negotiated domesticity, purdah, kinship, and familial authority while expanding women's intellectual and social presence. Rather than measuring their agency against Western ideals of individual emancipation, the article situates their interventions within the historical and cultural conditions that shaped their choices. Recovering these voices is therefore essential to a more nuanced understanding of gender, reform, and social transformation in late-colonial India.

Keywords: Muslim women; Waheed Jahan; reform; print culture; gender; late-colonial India.

Introduction

The history of social reform in late-colonial India has often privileged male reformers and institutions, leaving women's intellectual contributions at the margins. Among Muslim women, however, education and print culture created new possibilities for participation in debates on gender, family, and social change. Figures such as Waheed Jahan negotiated the constraints of seclusion, domesticity, and patriarchal authority while articulating their own reformist visions. Their engagement demonstrates that women's agency did not always emerge through a rejection of existing social structures but could also be expressed through their strategic negotiation and reinterpretation. By recovering these voices, this study examines Muslim women's role in shaping reform and expanding the boundaries of social and intellectual participation in late-colonial India.

Discussion and Results

The dominant image of Indian Muslim women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of being uneducated, silent, and secluded.¹ Given a comparative degree of invisibility, Muslim women are even more invisible to history than other women.² Exploring the history of Muslim women in South Asia presents problems of sources as well as interpretation. Sources (about Muslim women) by Muslim women are even difficult to find, because even if educated, such women did not write significantly. Writings regarding Muslim women and need for their reforms/education started to appear from late nineteenth century. One source to study these women is to explore the writing contemporary Muslim men. Among such men, an unequivocal voice for ameliorative reforms for Muslim women emerged in late nineteenth century as a solution to ongoing political and socio-cultural decline of Indian Muslims.³ Assuming an interdependence between home and the world, the solution naturally lay in purification and

rectification of religious/personal life and women were viewed as an essential part of this process.⁴ Thus in 1869 Nazir Ahmad published his first novel promoting women's education titled *Mirat-ul-Arus*; in 1874 Altaf Hussain Hali produced *Majlis-un-Nissa*, a didactic work on benefits of female education; in 1898 Mumtaz Ali began publishing a women's magazine called *Tahzib-un-Niswan*; in 1904 Shaikh Abdullah began another women's journal the *Khatoon*; in 1906 was published Ashraf Ali Thanwi's monumental female curriculum, the *Bahisht-e-zewar*; Rashid-ul-Khairi came with his *Ismat* in 1908.⁵ Following Kenneth Jones' model, the Muslim reforms can also be put into two categories, to borrow Jones' terminology—(1) Transitional (arising in pre-colonial world from indigenous forms of socio-religious dissent, with little or no influence of colonial milieu) (2) Acculturative (emerging within the colonial milieu and led by anglicized individuals).⁶ The first category includes the efforts and writings of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624), Syed Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlavi (1561-1642), Shah Wali-Ullah Muhaddith Dehlavi⁷ (1703-62), etc. The acculturative section while responding to the European critique, sought compatibility of Islam with modernity.⁸

The limited literature written on the acculturative aspect of Indian Muslims tends to ignore or gloss over the role of Muslim women. If at all they get a place in history, it is as subjects of such reforms, not as agents themselves.

So this paper attempts to look at the trajectory of women's reforms in Aligarh, its nature, and implications for the elite (Ashraf). This paper examines the role of women as agents in the reform movement by taking up the study of Waheed Jahan (1886-1939), wife of Shaikh Abdullah (1874-1965), a pioneer of Muslim women's education at Aligarh in twentieth century. The paper thus, through biographical writings, Urdu journals, letters, etc seeks to examine her role in reforms. Particularly significant in this regard is the issue of purdah in reform, which while being considered as an obstacle to women's education was at the same time also defined as the community's "Muslim identity" and more specifically the reformers' "elite identity". The paper looks at these contradictions and at Waheed Jahan's efforts at women's reforms amid such contradictions. It focuses on the role of Waheed Jahan in ending the relative isolation of Indian Muslim women, while at the same time preserving the Muslim and the elite identity of the community.

Born in 1874 in a landholding family in Delhi, Waheed Jahan was one of the four daughters of Mirza Ibrahim Beg, a minor municipal official in Delhi. The ancestors of Mirza Ibrahim were Mughals who had maintained tradition of learning and government services during the transition to British rule. Mirza Ibrahim sent his only son, Bashir Mirza to Aligarh college, where he became friend of Shaikh Abdulla.⁹ Mirza Ibrahim also educated his four daughters, teaching them Urdu and Persian himself at home, and inviting an Englishwoman to come and instruct them in arithmetic and elementary English. Waheed Jahan, though purdah-observing, thus had a good vernacular education, knew little English and also wrote a fine hand¹⁰ but she never had any formal education.

Waheed was married to Shaikh Abdullah. Shaikh was a Kashmiri convert to Islam who obtained a law degree from Aligarh and established his practice there. In 1902 he succeeded in becoming the secretary of Women's Education Section of Mohammadan Education Conference¹¹, the main aim of which was to start a normal school at Lahore to advocate women's education and to train zenana teachers. To champion the cause, Shaikh Abdullah started a monthly journal in 1904, the *Khatoon*. Begam Abdullah became the editor of this journal. *Khatoon* in its pages gave space to both male and female reformers. Begam Sultan Jahan, Binnat Nasiruddin Haider, Binnat Nazir-al-Baqir, Suharwardiya Begam, etc were among important contributors to the journal.

Unable to start a normal school at Lahore, Waheed Jahan advised her husband to start a primary school in Aligarh for Sharif girls. But the school needed funds, building, transport and clientele.¹² The couple took to the task of soliciting support from Ashraf men and women for their cause. The Mohammadan Educational Conference in 1904 resolved in favor of starting a girls school in Aligarh. Waheed Jahan proved to be an efficient organizer, manager and fundraiser. She along with her husband organized a meeting of Muslim women in 1905, the first of its kind, where purdah observing women came together participate from as far away as Lahore and Bombay to discuss their issues.¹³ Many men opposed the meeting, viewing it as a show of western beliefs and customs but Waheed Jahan, quoting the Prophet and giving examples of women education in Egypt and Turkey, established how the meeting was fully in consonance with both Islamic and Sharafat ethos.¹⁴ In her welcome address, she said:

When women meet among themselves, there will be more solidarity . . . Now there is a division between educated and uneducated women. Uneducated women, who do not go out, think that respectability is confined to the four walls of their houses. They think that people who live beyond those walls are not respectable and not worthy of meeting. But God has ordained education for both men and women, so that such useless ideas can be dispensed with. . .¹⁵

The women also held an exhibition displaying their talent in embroidery, needlework, calligraphy, painting etc. While some were impressed by their talents, others equally opposed the move.¹⁶ Zohra Fyzee (president of the meeting) and Atiya Fyzee of Bombay being the most ardent supporters of Abdullahs were also present. A resolution favoring a girls' school in Aligarh was also passed.¹⁷

In October 1906, Aligarh Zenana Madrasa (girls' school) enrolled seventeen students. The curriculum included Urdu, basic arithmetic, needlework, and the Quran. Waheed Jahan took the responsibility of daily supervision of the school. She went to school every day, leaving her own growing family in charge of servants. She would often share her food with the poor girls, going without food herself.¹⁸ After six months, the enrollment increased to fifty-six. It was as a result of Waheed Jahan's efforts that the school received a grant of 15,000 and a monthly grant of 250¹⁹. Impressed by Waheed's supervision, the observance of purdah and religious instructions in the school, the Aligarh families were convinced that sharafat was being preserved there.²⁰ Resultantly, the initial reluctance decreased and by 1909 the roll went up to 100 students and the school moved to a large house.²¹

In 1914 the school was transformed into a boarding school, and the All- India Muslim Ladies' Conference (Anjuman-Khavatin-i-Islam) was established at Aligarh. Begam Sultan Jahan came for the gala inaugural ceremony, other elite women from Punjab, Bombay, Hyderabad and Lucknow also joined, important among them were Fyzee sisters, Abru Begam, Begam Shafi, Begam Shah Nawaz, etc. Proper purdah arrangements were made for their travel and stay.²² The Begam of Bhopal in her ribbon-cutting speech urged the Muslim women to follow the example of Waheed Jahan, praising her organizational and maternal roles.²³ Only nine girls were enrolled in the residence hall in 1914- one girl from Aligarh College community, three daughters of Waheed Jahan, three of her sister, and two orphan girls. By the end of the year, the enrollment rose up to twenty five.²⁴ This was the result of what Gail Minault calls as Abdullahs' portrayal of girls' school as an extension of girls' families and also of their own.²⁵ Waheed Jahan invited parents of such girls to Aligarh for a few days to stay in the hostel, to convince them that the conditions there were safe enough to let their daughters stay.²⁶ She moved in with the girls and acted as a foster mother to them, counseling them, nursing them, and treating them as a part of their own extended family.²⁷ This earned her the name of 'Ala Bi'- a motherly nickname commanding both authority and affection.²⁸

Apart from the lessons in Quran, Maths, English, History, Geography and Islamic theology, the school also offered lessons in embroidery and cooking. Five daily prayers, exercise and games were also ensured.²⁹ Sir Syed's scheme a "clean break" with family traditions could not be applied in case of the girls' school. In order to persuade the Ashraf, Sharif family values had to be upheld, continued, protected and emphasized in the school.³⁰ In this regard, it is pertinent to discuss the issue of purdah versus reforms here. The Abdullahs chose to go with strict purdah, fortress like walls enclosed the school, only close relatives could visit the students, even their mail was watched by Waheed Jahan.³¹ Her supervisory duties included all those of a Sharif woman head of household: housekeeping, laundry, marketing, she would even taste each dish cooked for the girls.³² While the observance of purdah was agreed upon, but its form was a matter of debate. Both Shaikh Abdullah and Begam Abdullah agreed that the purdah practiced in Sharif society was more restrictive than purdah sanctioned by the Shari'a. But to secure social acceptance for the school, the Abdullahs' did not tear the curtains of purdah observation but rather "institutionalized" and accommodated purdah within the gamut of reforms. Thus Waheed Jahan succeeded in preserving both the "elite" and the "Muslim" identity of herself and her community, while simultaneously breaking the relative isolation of Indian Muslim women. The girls' school became an intermediate college in 1925 and started degree classes in 1937 (250 students). Waheed died in 1939 at the age of 55.³³

As the relation between education and social change is a complex and unpredictable one, varying from culture to culture and between classes in the same culture. The school founded by Abdullas' did not fulfill all the expectations. Being Sharif, they spoke to a sharif clientele, this naturally limited the impact of their reforms. Further, purdah may have been rendered more respectable and adamant by its codification at this and other girls' schools.³⁴ Increase in the enrollment did not necessarily signify an increasing number of employed women. Being vocational, training classes were discouraged as low status. In a word, Aligarh Women's College remained identified with a certain class of Indian Muslims only and felt short of its ambition to be the center for the intellectual and social revitalization of the Muslim community in India.³⁵ Nevertheless the educational reforms contributed to many social developments. The increasing number of educated women created a market for the new publications by and for the women. The 1930's see an increase in the numbers of meetings and associations for women only. Moreover the treatment of Waheed Jahan, of the college girls, as her own extended family created a sense of sisterhood among the girls. They called each other as "Apa"(sister), and Shaikh Abdullah as "Papa Mian" and Begam Abdullah as "Ala Bi"--a parental term of endearment and respect. This familial system of ethos was unique to the Aligarh Women's College down to the death of Waheed Jahan Begam in 1939.

Conclusion

Muslim women such as Waheed Jahan were not merely passive beneficiaries or peripheral participants in late-colonial reform; they were among its active architects. Although their reformist vision remained shaped by domesticity, kinship, seclusion, and the preservation of male familial authority, their interventions nevertheless expanded women's intellectual and social presence. By entering print culture and public debate, these women transformed spaces traditionally associated with constraint into important arenas of reform and negotiation. Their contributions must therefore be assessed within the historical conditions that structured their choices rather than measured solely against Western notions of individual emancipation. The emergence of previously silent—or deliberately silenced—women as public voices carried profound social and political significance. Restoring them to the forefront of reform history is not

simply an act of inclusion; it is essential to a fuller and more accurate understanding of social transformation in late-colonial India.

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