

Muslim Women's Social Reform as Reflected in Women's Urdu Journalism in the early 20th Century North India

Md. Yousuf

Research Scholar (PhD), Centre of Advanced Study, Department of History
Aligarh Muslim University

Abstract: *In the mid to late nineteenth century, women's journalism began to appear in several Indian languages. Women's journalism challenged patriarchal conceptions of society and boosted women's social, political and educational reforms. Women's journalism had a transformational impact on their lives. Muslim middle-class Urdu-speaking women used this platform to express themselves and share views with men and women of other societies. In the present study, I have focused on how Urdu women's journalism as a mouthpiece boosted Muslim women's intellectual engagement and social reform, which forwarded their claims for gender justice in early 20th-century North India.*

Keywords: Journalism, Social Reform, Parda, Burqa, Education, Widow remarriage, Women's Rights.

Urdu journalism is essential for studying women's education and social reforms among Sharif Muslim households in north India. The first women's Urdu magazines were introduced by males, with or without the assistance of their wives. On March 5, 1884, the first Urdu women's periodical, *Rafeeq-e-Niswan*, was published from Lucknow. Isabella Thobourn, a well-known Christian missionary lady, introduced it.¹ Syed Ahmad Dehlvi founded *Akhbar un Nissa*² on August 1, 1884, immediately after this. From the beginning of the 20th century, Urdu women's journals started appearing regularly, the lead being taken by the *Tehzib un Niswan*. Urdu women's journalism started significantly later than Bengali and Hindi women's journalism. Still, women eventually began actively participating in publishing activities and began to dominate the sector. It challenged society's patriarchal views and widened the boundaries of women's roles and consciousness.

Issues discussed in the women's magazines:

Parda issue

Parda remains a contentious subject in women's magazines. The

custom's long-standing predominance hampered women's movement and visibility in public life. Because of the severity of *parda*, ladies were forced to keep physical distance from both men and women. In response to this issue, an anonymous woman published an essay titled 'Girls *Parda* from Women' in the *Tehzib un Niswan*.³ Concerning the stringent implementation of *parda*, she stated that women were required to follow it in front of men and women. It had been so harsh that they could not even walk outside on their terraces to breathe fresh air.⁴ In response to the abovementioned essay, Zubaida Khatun from Lahore backed the anonymous writer's viewpoints in the next edition of *Tehzib un Niswan*. She was shocked by the strictness with which the anonymous writer enforced *parda* and remarked that it was not that severe in her household. She questioned the practice of *parda*, claiming it was needless to pursue such an outmoded practice.⁵

Doctor Begum Abdul Gafoor wrote an essay in the *Harem* magazine that questioned the sanctity of this practice. The first verse used by Doctor Begum Abdul Gafoor to refute the holiness of *parda* was from the chapter 'Al Imran' (verse 61). This verse discusses God's order to the Prophet to summon his men or women with non-believers (men/women) so that a meeting may be conducted to resolve any issues between them. According to the writer, the Prophet, with Hazrat Ali (the Prophet's son-in-law), Fatima (the Prophet's daughter), and his grandsons (Hassan and Hussian), encountered the non-believers (men/women). The author argued that if a meeting of men and women, believers and non-believers, could be convened during the Prophet's time, why does a patriarchal society have qualms about women leaving their homes and participating in public life?⁶ In the following issue of *Harem*, another piece about *Parda* was published.⁷ Doctor Begum Abdul Gafoor utilised an excerpt from Maulvi Ahmad Mukhtar Sahib Abbasi's work, which had several biblical pieces of evidence against the *parda* system.

Hussani Begum received a monetary prize for writing many articles for *Tehzib un Niswan* in 1904 against the *Parda*.⁸ She campaigned for the use of Mrs. and Ms. before their names rather than the names of their male (father, husband, brother, and son).⁹ After discarding the *parda*, Nazar Sajad Haider added Ms. before her name.¹⁰ Hussani Begum, a female writer, opposed defining women concerning their males, emphasising that such practises stripped women of their identity and personality. Notably, geniuses like Hussani Begum had such forward-thinking thoughts in an era when it was deemed impolite to address women by their first names in public. The taboo was so rigid that even postmasters could not openly state the identities of subscribers of women's publications.¹¹

In the context of English women's writing, Elaine Showalter stated that female authors established themselves in an intellectual ambience that male writers otherwise controlled.¹² Women thinkers of India, such as Hussani Begum, are notable for emphasising women's self-identification rather than the acknowledgement given to male members of their family. This was a direct refutation of the notion that the name of their men should recognise

women. It's worth noting that Muhammadi Begum's (editor of *Tehzib un Niswan*) name never appeared on the magazine's cover. It wasn't until 1914, six years after her death, that the name appeared on *Tehzib un Niswan*'s cover page.¹³

Apart from print media, parda was debated in public venues such as women's associations. The topic of parda was highlighted at the 'All India Women Conference,'¹⁴ held on March 26, 1918, in Bhopal. The editor of *Al Nissa*, Sughra Humayun Mirza, submitted a resolution on parda, advocating the discard of the practice.¹⁵ As a result, academicians Rokiya Sakhawat Hussain wore it in their personal lives despite their condemnation of the parda (Burqa). Rokiya Sakhawat Hussain had to compromise since she needed to recruit females to her school immediately. Despite her aversion, women chastised Sughra Humayun Mirza for observing such a compromise or contradiction.¹⁶

Sughra Humayun Mirza responded to Western allegations that Islam is to blame for the existence of the backward practice of Parda. She said that parda existed before Islam and was practised in Egypt and other European nations where women were already segregated.¹⁷ She presented historical data that women were accessible throughout the Prophet's time. She described how, during the Prophet's time, women battled alongside men, got education from men, and served as instructors to them, like in the instance of Hafiz Ibn Asakir,¹⁸ who stated that eighty female teachers educated him.¹⁹

Sughra Humayun Mirza admitted the practice of parda in Indian society but contended that there was no Scriptural evidence. She cited Maulana Shibli's travelogue, "Safar Nama Rome wa Misrwa Sham," which describes a society where men and women coexist peacefully but not in India. She highlighted the strictness of the parda in India and stated that women exercised parda from other women in particular households. Women's garments were not provided to washermen or tailors in different families for washing or stitching in those days. She thought it was insane that Muslim guys were proud of it. She went on to say that men's patriarchal attitudes provided enough opportunity for non-Muslims to demonise Muslim women and Muslim culture.²⁰

Women were active in a number of national groups throughout the 1920s. The Ali Brothers (Muhammad Ali and Showket Ali) and Jinnah were special invitees to the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress in 1920.²¹ Some Muslim women attended. Mrs. Ruttie, Jinnah's wife, Mrs. Yaqub Hussain, and Nishat-un-Nissa Begum, Hasrat Mohani's wife, were among them.²² The media chastised these women for failing to observe parda during the Indian National Congress session.²³

Bilquis Begum unambiguously claimed that the practice of parda observed in India was not according to Sharia law but rather conventional, thoroughly exposing the double standards maintained by Begum Hasrat Mohani's male detractors. She claimed that the disparity in following the parda by three female Indian National Congress members should be seen in

this light. She used Maulana Shibli's travel report of Egypt to delegitimise the common practice of *parda* in India. Using Maulana Shibli's statement, she emphasised that women and men can freely roam in Turkey.²⁴

Doctor Begum Abdul Gafoor, as a medical practitioner, was concerned about women's health. Her interest in women's health was evident in her *Harem* magazine. She said that most Muslim women belonging to the middle classes held that *parda* practice was more rigid and were the biggest sufferers of poor health standards while providing data on an increasing number of typhoid infections among Muslim women.²⁵ She backed up her views with statistical data that 80% of typhoid-affected women were middle-class.²⁶ She contended that women suffered more in the lower classes, not just because of *parda* but also because of poverty. In their situation, they suffered twice: culturally and economically. The third class, the wealthier, observed *parda* to some extent and lived in adequately ventilated homes. There were additional factors that harmed women's health. She listed them as follows:

1. Forced Marriages
2. Polygamy
3. Divorce
4. Ignorance of women.
5. Ill-treatment of women by men.
6. Idle life of Muslim women.
7. Political subjugation.

The Urdu women's publications were not only community-centred, but they were also inclusive in addressing non-Muslim women's problems. For example, the presidential speech of Maharani Chamnabai, Maharani of Baroda, was published in the February 1927 edition of the *Harem*: she delivered the address during the inaugural session of the 'All India Women Conference' at Poona in January 1927.²⁷ She emphasised the negative impacts of *parda* on women's bodies.²⁸

Educational Reforms of Women

Educated women of Muslim society led a campaign for women's education as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. Mrs Nasir Jung, who appreciated *Tehzib un Niswan's* efforts to popularise the cause of women's education, provided several arguments supporting women's education.²⁹ She used the Prophet's tradition to help women's right to education, emphasising that 'getting knowledge for every man and woman is obligatory'. She saw women's education as a religious responsibility in this way.³⁰

Mrs Nasir Jung explained the need for women's education by considering the desires of modern-educated men. She contended that educated husbands and illiterate wives did not make for happy conjugal couples since their interests, preferences, and perceptions were incompatible, resulting in perpetual domestic turmoil.³¹ She advocated for developing women's intellectual powers through education to make them ideal partners for their English-educated husbands.³²

Although the necessity for women's education was limited to making them better mothers and wives,³³ the demand for women's education garnered significant support from educated middle-class men at the turn of

the twentieth century.³⁴ From 1910 to the present, the primary concern of women reformers has been how to educate women. The fifth session of the Indian Muslim Ladies' Conference, held in Lahore from March 3 to 5, 1918, focused on two issues: polygamy and women's education. Abru Begum, who presided over the meeting, emphasised the need to make women's education plans. She expressed her displeasure with the home-based schooling.³⁵ She stressed the need to produce well-trained female teachers and develop an appropriate curriculum. She was critical of the British curriculum implemented in Indian schools. She sought a well-defined curriculum based on the Indian people's interests and the Muslim community's cultural sensibility. She advocated for practical education for women to become wage earners and emphasised the importance of establishing a women's university.³⁶

The Muslim Ladies Conference also approved a resolution requesting that the Muslim University set aside a specific amount for women's education. Muslim women intellectuals defended their demand by claiming that while women may contribute to men's education by donating to the Muslim University, why could the university not allocate funds to support women's education?³⁷ The 1920s witnessed a change in women's discussions over women's education. Authors of Women's magazine have progressed beyond the concept of competent domesticity, i.e. making women better moms and perfect wives. According to them, education was now required to pursue public employment and work for the government.³⁸ A female writer claimed in the 1920 edition of *Al Nissa* that the necessity for women's education was already understood, and women were to focus more on higher education, with the establishment of a women's university being one major step in that direction.³⁹

Noorani Begum's article in *Al Nissa* compared the advancement of Indian women to that of Western (British) women.⁴⁰ She recounted Western women's advances in various life sectors, providing examples of how Western women became physicians, judges, merchants, equestrians, warriors, and so on. She also praised Eastern ladies such as Sughra Humayun Mirza, Begum of Bhopal (Shah Jahan Begum), Begum Hasrat Mohani, Mrs Hyderi, and Amjadi Begum (wife of Maulana Muhamamd Ali Jauhar). Nonetheless, she contended that the number of such females in India was comparable to the amount of salt in the flour.⁴¹

Although women intellectuals continued to demand women's rights from the standpoint of competent domesticity, the need for education gained traction as time passed. Amjadi Begum, emphasising the necessity of women's education, warned men that if they did not marry educated women, their married life would be disrupted since illiterate spouses would be a cultural burden on them. She believes women's education aimed to make educated men's families happy.⁴²

Widow Remarriage and widowhood

Widowhood and widow remarriage were other critical problems that

women reformers addressed from the beginning of the twentieth century. The publication of Altaf Hussian Hali's *Bewa-ke-Munajat*, which emphasised the plight of widows in India, pushed the topic to the forefront.⁴³ However, women intellectuals had been debating the subject before Altaf Hussian Hali. Muhib Hussian (editor of *Mui'llim Niswan*) addressed the issue of widows in his magazine, *Mui'llim Niswan*⁴⁴, but it received regular attention in the *Tehzib un Niswan*.

In the August 24, 1901, issue of *Tehzib un Niswan*, a widow protested to the editor about disregarding widows' concerns in Indian society. This letter elicited a strong reaction from both the editor and the readers. Mohammadi Begum, the editor, promised to cover the topic of widowhood and widow remarriage, and she did.

Muhammadi Begum addressed the topic of widow remarriage in the December 14, 1901, issue of *Tehzib un Niswan*. She disagreed with the widow who wrote her letter on widow remarriage. Although the 'saddened widow' pleaded to cease the various atrocities committed on widows, she did not suggest widow remarriage in her letter.⁴⁵ However, Muhammadi Begum passionately pushed for widows to be remarried and supported their stand with scriptural evidence. She referenced several lines (from the chapter *Bakra*) and contended that widows might remarry at their leisure after a four-month and ten-day period following the death of their spouses.⁴⁶ However, like many other Hindu and Muslim reformers of the period, she promoted remarriage only for young widows and not for elderly widows.⁴⁷

The Western ladies also paid close attention to the topic of widow remarriage. Miss Church⁴⁸ was a subscriber of the magazine *Shareef Bibi* and a 'parda club' member in 1910 who paid attention to widow remarriage.⁴⁹ This group was made up of both English and Indian ladies.⁵⁰ Miss Church offered statistics on the number of younger widows in India in *Shareef Bibi*. She noted how early marriage for girls robbed them of the ability to educate themselves. As a result, the girls' mental abilities did not develop, culminating in their marital maladjustment. The author contended that the rising number of widows was a direct result of the heinous practice of underage marriage. The large age gap between brides and grooms led to the growing number of widows. She provided specific statistics on widows in the magazine *Shareef Bibi* (February 1912), also published in the 1915 edition of *Vivekavati*, a Telugu-language women's publication.⁵¹

The female mortality rate was another serious issue that drew the attention of colonial Muslim scholars. Doctor Begum Abdul Gafoor, using statistics from Kanpur municipal records, stated that the death rate was most significant in 1926-27 compared to the preceding year.⁵² According to a *Harem* magazine article, the death rate was 43.07% per thousand in the previous year (1926) and 53.48% in the present year (1927). She warned Kanpur's males and recommended scientific solutions to the problem after revealing the specifics of the women's death rate, which was reported at 93.54% per thousand.

Issues of Polygamy:

For a long time, the question of polygamy was hotly debated in women's periodicals. This issue was complex and controversial, considering that Prophet Muhammad had several wives. Women, on the other hand, argued against this practice on secular grounds. Hamida Begum was one of the first female academicians to speak out against polygamy.⁵³ It was remarkable that she did not rely on scripture (re)interpretation to defend her anti-polygamy stance. She revealed the different pretexts that guys use to marry more than one. According to her, men pretended to have no children from their first spouses or to have just daughters. While asserting the plight of polygamy victims, she said that any means should prohibit polygamy. Her aversion to the habit was so intense that she said that if a husband wanted to remarry, he should first poison his first wife.⁵⁴ She urged women to get together to stop this heinous practice. An anonymous lady endorsed Hamida Begum's commitment in the following edition of *Tehzib un Niswan*. She praised Hamida Begum for her determination. She offered the example of a person she knew who desired another wife for no other reason than desire. She debated the benefits and drawbacks of polygamy and determined that it harmed happy married life.⁵⁵

An anonymous lady spoke out against polygamy in the *Mu'llim Niswan* (June 1900). Without the support of the colonial administration, which regarded polygamy as an issue of religious intervention, she urged a few educated females to come up to oppose this social evil and presented a memorandum to the government against it.⁵⁶ Polygamy was an intensely controversial topic at the 5th session of the Muslim Ladies Conference in Lahore. Jahan Ara Shahnawaz, who presented the motion condemning polygamy, argued that no religious authority sanctioned the custom of polygamy in India.⁵⁷ She passionately opposed it, claiming that it harmed the community's growth.⁵⁸ She urged women to unite to put an end to this evil custom.

Sahar Banu explored the different circumstances that gave birth to polygamy while explaining its origins in the women's periodical *Musturat-i-Kanpur*⁵⁹. She said that throughout the Prophet's time, each territorial tribe attempted to expand its political authority. This led to the institutionalisation of polygamy; therefore, more and more women were married to strengthen political relations and increase military might through population growth.⁶⁰ She said that the Prophet's polygamy should be taken into account in this context. She contended that each age group had a distinct set of circumstances. She added that sometimes being incorrect was necessary to deal with the terrible. However, its ultimate goal was discouraging evil custom rather than fostering it.

Women's Rights and Justices

Coming out in a public place was not possible for women at the turn of the twentieth century due to significant patriarchal prohibitions on women's public exposure.⁶¹ However, Akbari Begum covertly published

several articles and novels⁶² addressing women's plight. She denounced the patriarchal stifling of women's voices. She showed twin tyranny of patriarchal rule, which, on the one hand, committed crimes against women while also preventing them from expressing their grief.⁶³

Miss Abdul Sattar made a similar argument while discussing the same issue. She questioned the subjection of women based on men's biased and unjustified constructs in her piece, published in the September edition of *Shareef Bibi* (1910). She claimed that males stereotyped women, calling them dimwitted and ignorant. She wondered if one asked males for proof of all their slander against women, they would start telling the cock and bull stories to support their nastily inherited positions. In contrast to the fact that the Quran explicitly addresses the dishonesty of women, which men frequently utilise to bring out to us. She contended that with men's entrenched patriarchal biases against women, women may expect the former to break down the gender barrier.

Women's political consciousness was on the rise in the 1920s. Many women took part in the Non-cooperation and Khilafat movements. At the same time, the All India Women's Conference was held in 1927, strengthening the spirit of other women's associations. These changes aided women in becoming more politically aware of their rights.

Imtiaz Fatima, editor of *Sartaj* magazine, authored an article on men's resistance.⁶⁴ Imtiaz Fatima strongly condemned the criticism imposed by men, stating such complaints merely showed men's double standards, and they interpreted the Islamic texts to suit their vested interests.⁶⁵ She bolstered her case further by asking why the press remained silent when the Punjab courts ruled against the inheritance of property by women, a right that Islam recognises. She revealed the patriarchal monster buried in them by offering another example of how men disobeyed the restrictions of the Torah by marrying multiple wives, which occasionally exceeded the maximum of four.⁶⁶ She advocated women's divorce rights (*khula*), stating that women had been subjugated to such an extent that they were afraid to utilise this privilege. She asserted that men conspired to keep women illiterate so that they would not be able to grasp their rights as outlined in the holy scriptures.⁶⁷

Imtiaz Fatima worked tirelessly to mobilise women in Punjab's Multan province, an area where women were particularly oppressed.⁶⁸ Many women were mobilised in the Multan region in February 1928 for the second annual All India Muslim Ladies' Conference session held in Delhi. As a result, many resolutions on women's rights were enacted at the municipal level.⁶⁹ Women overwhelmingly agreed to support the Age of Consent Bill and urged that the age of marriage for females must be set to 16 years. Another resolution was passed, requiring the Punjab government to form a committee to investigate women's issues and pass laws to protect women's property rights on the *Mehr*, prohibit polygamy and restore women's right to divorce (*khula*), among other things.⁷⁰

Women's consistent collective efforts became effective in the shape of

the enactment of numerous legislation protecting women's rights in the 1930s. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, sometimes known as the Sarda Act, was passed in September 1929 and took effect on April 1, 1930. However, Hindu women pioneered the campaign to raise the age limit of marriage, which Muslim women enthusiastically supported. They also launched a vigorous campaign in its favour, and the topic was widely discussed at numerous women's conferences. While presiding over the second annual session of the All India Ladies' Conference in Delhi in 1928, Begum Sultan Jahan warned the ladies against religious divisiveness and asked them to work together to advance women's rights.⁷¹ Despite the desire of many Muslim male leaders to exempt Muslims from the scope of the Sarda Act, Muslim women members of the All India Women's Conference firmly backed it. They sent a letter to the viceroy urging his support in favour of it.⁷² Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali⁷³ led a campaign in Sind to support the Sarda Act. To the ladies of Sind, she drew on her own experience, stating that her two daughters had been victims of this practice.⁷⁴ She was a vanguard in the enactment of the Sarda Act, emphasising the importance of applying the Act to the Muslim population.

Muslim women reformers had long advocated for the right to property granted to women by Islam. However, patriarchal systems prevented them from doing so. They sparked public outrage through the media and other public venues, notably women's journals and conferences. In this context, the Muslim League, in collaboration with other socio-religious organisations, pushed for the restoration of women's rights as sanctioned by Islam. As a result, the Shariat Act was established in 1937, restoring women's right to inherit property as prescribed by Islam.⁷⁵

Although the topic of women's right to divorce (*khula*) was raised in the second half of the nineteenth century, its popularity grew in the 1930s. Begum Sharifah Hamida Ali prepared a model *Nikkah Nama* (marriage contract) in 1937, including the provision granting a woman the right to divorce her husband.⁷⁶ This was a kind of protest against the lack of a divorce clause. It alarmed the Ulema society. As a result, the Ulema (for example, Ashraf Ali Thanawi) asserted that women might get divorced under the Malki School of Muslim Jurisprudence. This was the reason for enacting the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act in 1939.

We have seen how the women intellectuals discussed various issues such as education, health, *parda*, dress code, child marriage, widowhood and widow remarriage, polygamy, women's right to property and divorce, etc. Muslim women intellectuals demanded various rights without compromising their Muslim identity. They did not find any contradiction between their rights and Islam. Most of them powerfully argued that they were not enjoying rights as prescribed in their holy scriptures. The women's journals served as communicators of women's ideas and activism. It has seen how the journals published the speeches of women intellectuals delivered at various women's conferences and the activities undertaken by several women's organisations. Such spreading of information was

necessary for consolidating the women's movement, and, no doubt, the journals ably performed this extraordinary task. The ordinary reading public of women was informed about several things they could learn at home. We have seen how several female intellectuals discussed and debated issues that concerned them and arrived at certain conclusions. By publishing articles representing diverse opinions, the female readers were exposed to a new world of ideas from which they could choose. It also demonstrated that, despite being nationalistic, the Muslim women intellectuals did not blindly discard British intervention in Indian affairs, which was the reason why they welcomed legislation enacted by the British government. They strongly felt that it was only through legislation various discrimination perpetrated on Indian women could have ended. Their sustained campaign resulted in the passage of the Sarda Act, 1929; the Shariat Act, 1937; and the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939.

Notes and References: (Endnotes)

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 327
5. *Tehzib un Niswan*, 23 November, 1901, p. 376
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 23. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 3
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 30. *Ibid.*, p. 197
 31. *Op.cit.*, p. 199
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. *Shareef Bibi*, July 1909, pp. 21-22
 34. *Khatun*, November 1907, pp. 491-92
 35. *Tehzib un Niswan*, 23 March, 1918, p. 181
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 37. *Tehzib un Niswan*, 6 April, 1918, pp. 225
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 40. *Al Nissa*, no. 11, 1924, pp. 8-10
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