

**FAMILY IN TRANSITION: DISCOURSES ON POLYGAMY
AMONGST MUSLIMS OF NORTH INDIA, c. 1870-1918.**

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ABSTRACT

Asiya Alam: Family in Transition: Discourses on Polygamy amongst Muslims of North
India, c. 1870-1918.

(Under the direction of Yasmin Saikia)

This thesis explores the various discourses on polygamy amongst Muslims of North India in the last quarter of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. It examines two types of evidence: religious pamphlets and texts by social reformers and fictional literature or novels. Analyzing all these discourses, this thesis makes two arguments. First, that the reformulation of Islam and the construction of a modern Muslim identity by social reformers like Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali and novelists like Bashiruddin Ahmad was accomplished in part through a debate on knowledge about sexual difference, women's bodies and reproduction. Public opinion not only constituted political matters but also more "private" discussions on marriage, sexuality and reproduction. The "private space" was therefore a crucial element of the "public sphere." Secondly, novels also constitute this 'public' private space where they shed light on deeply held beliefs about marriage, children and family and reveals how love, conjugality and affection were narrated in the public sphere. Furthermore, novels were also an expression of female agency and allowed women independence in matters most crucial to them- marriage and family.

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Introduction

How did the end of Mughal Empire in 1857 and the establishment of British imperial power influence the Muslim family? In particular, how did ideas and institutions of the colonial rule impact familial relationships in the Muslim household? One of the familial practices that was subjected to myriad meanings as a result of the changing economic and social conditions arising out of colonialism was polygamy. In this and the previous century, concerned Muslims, whether they be male “modernists” and thinkers like Saiyid Ahmad Khan or lesser known female reformers such as Akbari Begum, have reflected on the practice of polygamy and its impact on family and society. Unfortunately, there has been no effort to gather their arguments together and present a coherent story on the genealogy of the contentious discourse on polygamy amongst Muslims of North India.¹ My thesis is an effort in that direction.

The theoretical framework of my thesis is situated within the burgeoning discourse of the ‘public sphere’ and makes two major arguments. First is that the reformulation of Islam and the construction of a modern Muslim identity by great reformers like Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali and novelists like Bashiruddin Ahmad was accomplished in part through a debate on knowledge about sexual difference, women’s bodies and reproduction. Marriage and family were the sites for the preservation of Islam and Muslim identity and these institutions were expected to conform to the basic precepts

¹For a study of polygamy in the Hindu community, see Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among Rajputs* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1995); Atul Krishna Kundu, *Polygamy and the Hindu* (Chinsura: Kundu, 1980); Malvika Karlekar, *Reflections on Kulin Polygamy: Nistarini Debi’s Sekeley Katha* (New Delhi: Center for Women’s Development Studies, 1995).

of Islam. Public opinion not only constituted political matters but also more “private” discussions on marriage, sexuality and reproduction. The “private space” was therefore a crucial element of the “public sphere.” The second argument proceeds from and reinforces this assertion on the “publicness” of private life. My thesis builds on this conceptual formulation of a ‘public’ private sphere and utilizes novels, which were published for mass consumption, to illuminate multiple positions in the public discourse on one particular aspect of the Muslim family: polygamous marriages. The intake of the novels by men and women was not merely an exercise in reading but a process involving acquisition of gendered subjectivity. The public opinion was constituted by multiple and divergent perspectives on sexual difference, and masculinity and femininity were not fixed categories but constantly being tested, challenged and reworked through public dialogue and contestation.

The use of novels raises two fundamental questions in our enquiry. First is how can novels aid in the historical analysis of the family and the household in the late colonial period? Secondly, what are the reasons for the narration of female voices in the novel? Both these questions require us to understand the nature of the Urdu literary public sphere in early twentieth century. The Urdu literary public sphere of early twentieth century was the platform for much debate on personal and social relationships within the family. It sheds light on deeply held beliefs about marriage, children and family and reveals how love, conjugality and affection were narrated in the public sphere. Furthermore, novels were also an expression of female agency and allowed women independence in matters most crucial to them- marriage and family.

The Urdu novel was a deeply gendered site and designated what was feminine: the use of leisure time and household activities, care of the body, marriage practices, gender differences and family relations. The act of writing granted women authority and control within the domestic space, and fiction provided a protest against the hierarchies of power within the family. Due to restrictions and societal constraints on political participation and public life, the primary terrain of women's activities was the family. Family was the site of their social and sexual subordination as well as tremendous support and affection that it offered. The process of participating in the public discourse on the family through the novel was an expression of their 'agency' and writing constituted one of the modalities for the realization of this agency.² Through an analysis of two novels authored by women, I try to "recover" some part of the "female voice" on polygamy to show multiplicity and range of ideas in the discourse on polygamy.

Method and Scope

In the following pages is an attempt to understand how the various positions on polygamy were argued. In other words, my interest is in the discursive aspects of the debate- what contentions were made against the practice, under what conditions was it defended and what was the nature of ambivalent attitudes, if any. I will examine two types of evidence, religious discourses in pamphlets and texts by social reformers written during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and fictional literature or novels published in early twentieth century. Sections from Saiyid Ahmad Khan's *A Series of*

²Nancy Armstrong has explored the rise of the novel in England and contends "that narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached most power and privilege to certain family lines." Nancy Armstrong "From Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel" in *The Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* ed. Michael McKeon, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 468.

Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto, Syed Ameer Ali's *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Muhammad* and Muhammad Abduh Ghani's *Polygamy: A Lecture* constitute the religious discourses on polygamy whereas the novels *Iqbal Dulhan* by Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Godar ka Lal* by Akbari Begum and *Ah-e-Mazluman* by Nazr Sajjad Hyder make up the fictional literature on polygamy.

Religious pamphlets written by Saiyid Ahmad Khan or Syed Ameer Ali during the late nineteenth century and fictional literature authored by Bashiruddin Ahmad or Akbari published in early twentieth century represent two sites of discourses that reveal different types of knowledge about the family. Religious pamphlets were conceptual arguments and address general principles and propositions that under gird the practice of polygamy. Social reformers used discourses based on principles of natural science and history to explain a practice sanctioned in Islam. On the other hand, novels and fiction reflected the anxieties and dilemmas of lived experiences and stories of men and women caught up in polygamy. They demonstrated how the tensions generated by the adoption of religious discourses of the earlier period were negotiated within the family. The writers of fiction were obliged to display detail of feeling and sentiment, and to propose resolutions to hostility and strife arising from polygamy within the family. The employment of religious commentaries and novels as historical sources provide multiple lenses to examine polygamy.

Finally, my thesis contributes to the growing interest on the history of family in South Asia. There have been now increasing number of historical interventions that have attacked the Eurocentric image of the Muslim family as the 'Oriental harem,' as a static

and mysterious space outside of history.³ More, however, needs to be accomplished and my thesis endeavors to contribute to this significant historical intervention for Muslims in modern South Asia.

Theoretical Overview: The Public Sphere

In the last two decades, there have been numerous historical and political studies devoted to discussions about the public sphere and the formation of public opinion. Much of this is due to the preponderant influence of Jurgen Habermas and his concept of the public sphere originally elaborated in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas's definition of public sphere stems from his analysis of the development of bourgeois society in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, in which "private" citizens assemble to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest." The "bourgeois public sphere" does not overlap with the state and historically acted as a counterweight to absolutist states.⁴

Compelling as it may be, the idea of "public sphere" in Habermas's sense has met considerable criticism for idealizing the liberal public sphere. One of the most important critiques has come from the feminists who accuse Habermas for overlooking the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public sphere. Joan Landes has argued that the new republican public sphere was primarily masculine, constructed in deliberate opposition to that of a more woman friendly salon culture that was stigmatized by the

³Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁴Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1989), p. 27. For an excellent exposition of Habermas, see Nancy Fraser "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

republicans eventually leading to the formal exclusion from political life of women.⁵ Extending Landes argument, Nancy Fraser convincingly argues that the exclusions not only of women but also of plebian men stemmed from social inequalities within the bourgeois public sphere and that these formal exclusions worked to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinate groups.⁶

If one were to apply these concepts of Habermas, gathered from an analysis of European historical development, one would conclude that the notion of a public sphere is either specific to modern societies or to Europe. However recent studies have demonstrated the presence of a dynamic public space in both pre-modern and non-European societies. Bayly has argued for an “indigenous public sphere” or an “Indian ecumene” during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Bayly contends that an important precondition for the development of the widespread debate on religion and politics was the flexibility and accessibility of the Hindustani or Urdu language. Discussions on religion, aesthetics and poetry were held at the courts and bazaars of towns and cities. Alongside questions of public doctrine and literary aesthetics, history also played an important role in maintaining the identity of the ecumene and merged into poetry, moral and political instruction and theology.⁷ Other historical works have investigated the role of public dialogue in community formation in early Muslim

⁵Joan Landes, *Women and Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁶Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990).

⁷C.A Bayly. *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 180-212.

societies.⁸ These studies have revealed that “traditional” Muslim societies had diverse and changing varieties of public spheres, whose effects have been as varied and far ranging as the complexity of Islamic civilization. They have emphasized Islam as a regulator of the social order and focused on the role of the Sharia as an autonomous force, the role of community in the public sphere and the nature of interaction between society and the ruling authorities.⁹

Studies on public sphere in the colonial period especially in South Asia have focused on political processes of electoral democracy and community consciousness. In a wide-ranging study, Sandria Freitag addressed the question of communalism by exploring public activities such as festivals, processions and other cultural spectacles in the towns of Uttar Pradesh, c. 1800-1940. The rhetoric and behavior of Ramlila, Ramnavami and Muharram processions in towns of Benaras, Bareilly, Agra, Kanpur and Lucknow led to the formation of larger, pan-Indian ideological constructs of “Hindu” and “Muslim” from local relational communities.¹⁰ In a critique of Habermas’s singular public sphere, David Gilmartin has argued that in order to understand the colonial state or the emergence of Muslim nationalism, one must attend to the “particularistic groups whose principles of internal organization and definition offered no potential challenge- no alternative, universal principle of ordering to the rationalized, scientific authority of the colonial state.”¹¹

⁸Shmuel Eisenstadt et. al. ed, *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

⁹Dale Eickelman, “The Religious Public Sphere in Early Muslim Societies,” in Eisenstadt et.al ed., *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, 1-8.

¹⁰Sandria Freitag, *Collection Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, there were intense contestations for religious authority and reformers argued competing positions on religious symbols, politics and communal consciousness.

Social Reformers in the Religious Public Sphere

The colonial period in India witnessed the rise of a dynamic religious public sphere where the contest for appropriation of sacred symbols and legitimization of religious authority amongst different groups was intense.¹² Amongst the Muslims, the participants in the public discourse included *ulama* of different doctrinal orientations such as the Firangi Mahalli, the Deobandis, the Barelwis and the Ahl-i-Hadith, independent Muslim scholars like Saiyid Ahmad Khan or Syed Ameer Ali and numerous other historical actors who responded to the challenges of colonial rule. The challenge was not simply the loss of Muslim political power and subsequent European domination but an urgent need to present new alternatives that do not sever continuity with the past in a world that was becoming increasingly and rapidly unfamiliar. The plurality of the movements and responses associated with the colonial rule demonstrates the multiple imaginations of Islam, Islamic values and of being Muslim in this period. The increasingly open contexts over the authoritative use of symbolic language of Islam also gave rise to a distinct religious public sphere that existed at the intersection of intellectual, political and social life of Muslims.

¹¹David Gilmartin, "Democracy, Nationalism and the Public: A Speculation on Colonial Muslim Politics" in James L. Sueur, ed., *The Decolonization Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 194.

¹²Barbara Metcalf, "Imagining Community: Polemical Debates in Colonial India," in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, ed. Kenneth W. Jones (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 229-40. For greater detail on socio-religious movements, see Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Rhetoric of Reform and the Fragmentation of “Sacred Authority”

In order to understand the nature of the contribution made by Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali to public discourses and its impact on the construction of Muslim identity, I use the term “sacred authority” as employed by Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori in their study of politics in the Muslim world.¹³ Eickelman and Piscatori argue that the discussion of Islam and politics based on the assumption that Islam makes no distinction between the religious and political realms is not very useful in understanding Muslim politics. Instead they view politics as the context over the interpretation of symbols that acquire religious meaning when appropriated by authority. This authority does not imply an “Islamic state” but is invested in individuals and institutions who become legitimate bearers of authority because they appear to embody cherished values and gradually transform themselves into “natural” leaders through the manipulation of symbols and the invocation of tradition.¹⁴ Eickelman and Piscatori further elaborate that the symbols are subject to widely different interpretations and competitors for sacred authority throughout Muslim societies are varied ranging from kings, presidents, military officers, bureaucrats, *ulama*, Sufi orders and nontraditionally educated intellectuals.¹⁵ In other words, it is not only the *ulama* who speak for Islam but a wide range of social and political actors differently positioned in society. This “fragmentation of authority,” they argue, has come about by the “modernization” programs of the postcolonial state such as higher education, technological changes involving spread of print and the rise of mass

¹³Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 57-8.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 68-9.

media, and the emergence of centralized commercial and bureaucratic structures in society.

One of the most significant constructions of sacred authority articulated in the religious public sphere during the nineteenth century is the religious thought of Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali. Both of them have contributed significantly to what has come to be called a “rationalist” interpretation of religious faith, practice and experience and the revision of Islamic theology to make it more consonant with the empirical sciences. The texts considered in this thesis, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*, by Saiyid Ahmad Khan published in 1870 and *The Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Muhammad* by Syed Ameer Ali published in 1873 demonstrate their competence and authority on Islamic theology and the early history of Islam, and their own understanding of the “true” faith of Islam. The former, *Essays on the Life of Muhammad*, contains commentaries on the Quran, theological literature on Muhammad and disputation on Islamic practices and institutions such as polygamy, divorce and slavery. The latter, *Critical Examination of Muhammad*, on the other hand, is a more erudite and exhaustive account of the history of Islam, its principles and its relation to other monotheistic faiths. Both Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali show familiarity with the European scholarship on Islam and Muhammad citing works of Sprenger, William Muir, Weil, Thomas Carlyle amongst others.

Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali commented on the “private” realm of society such as marriage in their religious discourses and we must now shift to an understanding of the “private sphere” to fully comprehend their argument.

Debate on the Separation of Public and Private Spheres

Following the seminal work of Carol Pateman, feminists have objected to the distinction between “private” and “public” as a rhetoric that serves to exclude women and their interests from the public debate. Habermas’s account rests on a distinction of “public” from the “private.” The “public” which includes state related matters and pertains to common good is contrasted to the “private” pertaining to the intimate domestic or personal life. This view, however, fails to explain the discourses of sexuality, marriage and family in journals, newspapers, religious tracts and novels, and their pertinent role in the formation of public opinion. Nancy Fraser argues that there was no singular “bourgeois public sphere” but multiple publics where subordinated groups- women, workers, and homosexuals- constructed alternative publics which she calls “subaltern counterpublics” to establish parallel discursive arenas and resist hegemonies dominant in the official public sphere.¹⁶

Within South Asia, historians of Bengali Hindi social reform have demonstrated how the “private” space of family was contested and informed by political currents of nationalism and religious identity. Tanika Sarkar has noted how the disempowerment of Indian men in the public arena of employment, business and worldly matters turned them towards claiming a sense of sovereign selfhood and mastery in their own homes. Liberal legislation such as the Age of Consent bill for marriage that was seen to threaten Hindu patriarchy also challenged a politically emasculated and insecure social community of upper caste Hindus. The history of Indian nationalism is thereby shifted in Sarkar’s work from the recognized issues in the political sphere and into the politics of relationships

¹⁶Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 67.

within the family.¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee has theorized that for nationalists women became the symbols of “spiritual life” which constituted the strength of Indian culture and far removed the ‘women’s question’ from the arena of political contest with the colonial state.¹⁸ Chatterjee’s formulation, however, overemphasizes the dichotomy between the ‘inner’ world of the household and the ‘outer’ world of politics and administration, not allowing for the interdependence of these spheres in the lives of reformers.

The model of separate public and private domains has also been challenged by studies focusing on the Muslim world. Leslie Peirce’s book *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* challenged the applicability of the public-private model to the Ottoman setting. The study made a major contribution to the reevaluation of the Ottoman state, and the sources of its royal women’s authority, family politics and gender relations in the *haram*.¹⁹ Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod’s study of Bedouin women’s ritual poetry complicated the question of public-private distinctions. By looking at Bedouin women’s poetry and codes of behavior, Abu-Lughod showed how these women were not ‘confined’ to a ‘domestic’ sphere; they were dynamic individuals who used cultural forms to express their sentiments.²⁰ Following the conceptual framework of Leslie Peirce’s work, Ruby Lal has argued that in the Mughal Empire, *haram* as a well-

¹⁷Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

¹⁸Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 233-53.

¹⁹Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁰Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986).

structured physical quarter and a distinct feminine space demarcated from more clearly marked male domains came to be institutionalized only during Akbar's reign.²¹

After this brief overview of literature on the question of the separation of the private sphere from the public, we can now discuss how this problematic to the domain of Urdu literature.

Urdu Literature: 'Private Life' in 'Public'

Critical to an understanding of the Muslim family in North India is the Urdu public sphere that acquired greater reach and expansion with the coming of the printed word. Urdu language formed its own cultural and intellectual community through institutional spaces of schools, press and the publishing industry. Francesca Orsini has proposed a "Hindi literary system" to demonstrate an enlarged vision of public space to locate the reformist Hindi literature in its proper institutional context.²² The development of the 'publicness' of Hindi ensured that "only such a language was fit for discussing 'public' matters, for creating literature, and for representing the jati."²³ In the Hindi literary system, institutions like the press, schools and publishing became concrete and discursive spaces for educated Indians. In these spaces language, ideas, literary tastes, and individual and group identities were reshaped, consciously as well as by the dynamics and momentum of each medium.

The formation of a similar "Urdu literary system" is indispensable to comprehending "reformist" literature especially that concerned with remaking women into an ideal wife

²¹Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

²²Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²³Ibid., 6.

and daughter. Margrit Pernau has made a significant contribution in this direction extracting different meanings of the ‘public’ amongst North Indian Muslims during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.²⁴

In a thought-provoking argument, Margrit Pernau divides the formation of public opinion amongst North Indian Muslims in two phases. In the first, she argues that public opinion between the late Mughal Empire and early colonial rule took shape in “semi-private” gatherings involving not political, but religious and poetic discussions. The second phase focuses on Muslim public opinion in north India in the last quarter of the nineteenth century where all the components of the modern public sphere- associations, newspapers, printed books- shifted their concern towards the personal and emphasized regeneration of the individual through the exemplary life of the individual Muslim and above all of the wife and daughter.²⁵

Margrit Pernau attributes this transition of public opinion from poetic and literary to the comportment and behavior of the women on the end of the Mughal Empire. The disappearance of Mughal rule meant that the ‘Muslimness’ of the community could no longer be guaranteed by the ruler but had to be maintained by efforts from the community. The ‘Muslimness’ of individuals especially the “respectability” of the female, her conforming to the tenets of Islam, was increasingly perceived as the one essential factor for the salvation of Islam and the community.²⁶ What Pernau effectively shows is the emergence of a ‘public’ private sphere beginning in the last quarter of the

²⁴Margrit Pernau, “From a ‘Private’ Public to a ‘Public’ Private Sphere: Old Delhi and the North Indian Muslims in Comparative Perspective” in *The Public and the Private: Issues of Democratic Citizenship*, ed. Gurpreet Mahajan and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 103-29.

²⁵Ibid., 104.

²⁶Ibid., 119-21.

nineteenth century. The novels under exploration in my thesis belong to this 'public' private sphere that was burgeoning with a plurality of opinions and perspectives by early twentieth century.

Before we proceed to analyze the novels, we must understand how polygamy was approached in non-literary mediums before the twentieth century by the stalwarts of Islamic reform, prominent amongst them are Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali.

Sacred Authority on Polygamy

One of the important features of Islam during the colonial encounter with the European powers, not only in South Asia but throughout the Islamic world, was the diversity in theme and orientation of religious interpretation that displays the dynamic nature of Islam, far from its popular image as a monolithic and stagnated system of ideas. In the early nineteenth century, for example, there were multiple centers of theological disputation within South Asia. One was the school of Shah Waliullah in Delhi, another was the Farangi Mahal in Lucknow and a third was the Khayrabad seminary. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Deoband school institutionalized the learning of Islamic religious tradition and affirmed Muslim identity in the context of colonial rule.²⁷

In addition to these strands of thought, another intellectual movement also took shape in the writings of Saiyid Ahmad Khan, Syed Ameer Ali and Chiragh Ali. Scholars have often labeled these thinkers as “modernists” and their ideas are attributed to changes associated with “modernity.”²⁸ In these analyses, these changes are related to broader

²⁷Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

²⁸For discussion of Islamic modernism, see Charles Kurzman ed., *Modernist Islam 1840-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mansoor Moaddal, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2 ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994); Clinton Bennett, *Muslims and Modernity: An Introduction to the Issues and Debates* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857-1964* (London: Oxford University, 1964).

social processes that involve the decline of the old social institutions, the development of capitalism, state and class formation. Prominent intellectuals and theologians like Saiyid Jamal ud-Din al Aghani, Saiyid Ahmad Khan, Chirag Ali, Muhammad Abduh, Syed Ameer Ali and Shibli Numani are portrayed as thinkers impressed by the achievements of the West insisting that Muslim community is compatible with law and reason.²⁹ Moreover, in this understanding, dynamism and change is associated with “modernity” placing it in opposition to what preceded before it or “tradition” which by implication becomes stagnant. The following excerpt taken from *Contemporary Debates in Islam: An Anthology of Modernist and Fundamentalist Thought* by Mansoor Moaddal and Kamran Talattof is a good example of the application of this ideology:

Generally, the Islamic modernists: accepted an evolutionary view of history with the West being at the pinnacle of the world civilization; praised the Western model; in varying degrees subscribed to the Newtonian conception of the universe; reformulated Islamic methodology in a manner congruent with the standards of nineteenth century social theory; and affirmed the validity of the scientific knowledge, even though it was not based on Islam; favored democracy and constitutionalism, and the *de facto* separation of religion from politics; and formulated a modernist discourse on women by rejecting polygamy and male domination.³⁰

There are several flaws in this interpretation of the intellectual repertoire of ‘modernists’ and of Islam’s historical development. First and foremost is that it ignores, what Lila Abu-Lughod calls, questions about the “politics of modernity.” These questions ask how new ideas and practices considered “modern” implanted in Europe’s colonies not only lead to emancipation but also produced new forms of control and domination.³¹

²⁹See Mansoor Moaddal’s *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 3.

³⁰Mansoor Moaddal and Kamran Talattof, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Islam: An Anthology of Modernist and Fundamentalist Thought* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 3-4.

Second is that it oversimplifies the discourse of contemporary thinkers turning them into passive and unthinking recipients of ideas and practices. It downplays the ambivalent relationship of Muslim modernists to European Enlightenment and their struggles with that heritage where they witnessed the European colonizer preach Enlightenment humanism to the colonized and at the same time deny it in practice. The encounter of Muslims with the West and things associated with it was and continues to be complex and multifaceted in which some aspects were embraced, some were repudiated and others were translated to produce new notions of cultural authenticity and identity. Furthermore, this process of negotiation cannot be studied under “Islamic modernism” or “Islam” but through the lens of cultures, nation-states and regions, with their distinct histories, relationships to colonialism and the West, different use of sacred symbols and class politics. Third, it constructs oppositional dichotomies of “tradition” and “modernity” to explain social and political transformation. This dichotomous construction has now been challenged in academic writing and there is recognition that “tradition” is not a monolithic entity any more than “modernity” is; that appeals to tradition are not necessarily a way of opposing change but can also facilitate change and that what constitutes “tradition” is the product of continuous conflict and contestation. As Hobsbawm points out, the invention of tradition is the “process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past.”³² The invention of tradition occurs

³¹Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6.

³²Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4-5. See also Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) on the construction of the colonial discourse on sati in India. For the invention of tradition in Muslim societies, see Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 22-45.

in all times and places, but, as Hobsbawm indicates, “we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys” older patterns or produces “new ones to which they were not applicable.”³³

Talal Asad has underlined the relevance of the concept of tradition, as a “discursive tradition,” to the study of Islam. To Asad:

A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.³⁴

If, according to Talal Asad, Islam in general ought to be approached as a “discursive tradition,” then as Muhammad Qasim Zaman argues, the particular facets of this tradition can also be viewed in a broadly similar way.³⁵ Different facets of the intellectual and religious history of Islam such as *sharia* or Sufism are discursive traditions in their own right. A close study of the history of these discursive practices can be used to understanding the changes in its history, and the significance and impact of those changes on Muslim communities.

It is within this frame of reference of Islam as a “discursive tradition” that we can understand “modernist” thinkers and their contributions to the intellectual and social history of Islam. One can view the methodology of “modernist” Muslim intellectuals as

³³Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, p. 5.

³⁴Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington D.C., Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14.

³⁵Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002), 6-7.

ijtihad involving a means to find new solutions to the problems of the age. In India, the “modernist” interpretation on Islam was epitomized in Saiyid Ahmad Khan’s “natural theology” and differing trends of other thinkers such as Chiragh Ali’s legal reforms and Ameer Ali’s historical approach towards Islam and his hagiographical studies.

The fragmentation of sacred authority in the discursive tradition of Islam is one of the most distinctive features of intellectual deliberation amongst Muslims in South Asia during the colonial period. This fragmentation can be attributed to the pressures of colonial rule and the multiple voices involved in the contestation over “reform” of older institutions and practices. The modern state, colonial as well as postcolonial, has everywhere fundamentally altered social and political structures of “pre-modern” society almost beyond recognition. This intervention of the modern state has been legitimated by ideologies of modernization, efficiency, utility, rationality, overcoming a static tradition and so forth. The targets of such initiatives have been varied including the family, law and education.

Through their texts, Saiyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali defined the contours of Islam for the modern Muslim conversant in English language. Eickelman has argued that texts, writing and print create social and political identities, and engender new forms of community and authority.³⁶ The directive to preserve a Muslim identity through a reading of these texts is a clearly stated aim in Saiyid Ahmad’s *Essays on the Life of Muhammad*. The book was written for “the young Mohammedans who were pursuing their study of the English literature, and were perfectly ignorant of their own theology” in order to

³⁶Dale Eickelman, “Introduction: Print, Writing and the Politics of Religious Identity in the Middle East,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 68 (1995): 133.

provide to them the “facts in reality” instead of “misrepresentation of plain and simple facts” as given in Muir’s account.³⁷

In the reformulation of Islam and Muslim identity by Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali, family and gender were important issues. The competition and struggle over the meaning and centrality of family was a major constituent in the construction of sacred authority. Family was the ground on which ideological battles were waged and discourses in the religious public sphere sought to establish proper gender relations based on the prescriptions of “true” or “authentic” Islam drawing boundaries between the Muslim and non-Muslim community and also between the “legitimate” bearers of sacred authority and the “true” guardians of community and the “internal Other.” The “private” realm of family was regulated and reshaped by the “public” religious sphere and the role of Islam in remaking family was certainly a contentious issue. Amongst Muslims, the calls for “reform” of gender roles included debates on education, veiling and polygamy. Discussion revolved around “remaking” women and their roles as mothers, as managers of the domestic realm, as wives of men and as guardians of religious tradition.³⁸

Representations of gender constituted one of the sites on which the struggle for authority occurred and discourses of the “private” were contested amongst actors and groups arguing their own interpretation of religious faith and practice in the “public” sphere. We begin our understanding of polygamy in the “private” sphere with the interpretation of Saiyid Ahmad Khan.

³⁷Saiyid Ahmad Khan, “A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto” (reprint), Lahore: Premier Book House, 1968, p. xii.

³⁸Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, 3-13.

Saiyid Ahmad Khan

Saiyid Ahmad Khan (Saiyid Ahmad) was born in 1817 in a Delhi family with notable connections to the Mughal court. As a child, he received religious education and studied the Quran in Arabic and the classics of Persian literature. He was deeply influenced by events of the nineteenth century in particular the failed uprising against the British in 1857. The revolt of 1857 formally ended Mughal rule in India and passed administration from the East India Company to the direct rule of the British crown. Christian W. Troll has argued that “after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the traumatic events accompanying and following it, Saiyid Ahmad entered the field of theology proper, that is, a rational interpretation of religious faith, practice and experience. Only then, furthermore, did he set himself the objective to contribute to the working out of a new *‘ilm al-kalam*, in other words, a new Muslim apologetic theology.”³⁹

Following the uprising of 1857, he dedicated himself to improving relations between British rulers and Muslim subjects. Saiyid Ahmad has often been accused of being “loyal” towards the British due to his efforts at improving relations between British rulers and Muslim subjects. His “loyalty” is seen as a strategic policy of survival under foreign rule and its alien institutions. Aziz Ahmad, a noted scholar on modernist movements in South Asian Islam, has argued that there are three stages to Saiyid Ahmad’s “loyalism.” First was between 1859 and 1870 when his objective was to develop an attitude of participation instead of opposition towards the British government, second was between 1870 and 1884, where he defended British rule and finally from 1887 to 1898 where his

³⁹Christian W. Troll, *Saiyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Religious Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1978), xvii-xviii.

politics began to ally with Muslim political separatism.⁴⁰ This reading of Saiyid Ahmad's life has proven to be extremely popular. The flaw in Aziz Ahmad's narrative is that it assumes a clear distinction between the presence of British rule in India and the status of Muslims in Indian society. As Aziz Ahmad argues, "there was only one way of survival left open, loyalism in politics and modernism in institutions." This clear wedge between politics, on the one hand, and institutions, on the other, ignores the challenges to Muslim identity following the massive social, political and economic convulsions of 1857. It is more useful to understand Saiyid Ahmad's relationship with the British as a kind of hesitant alliance that was formed only to resist Empire's unchallenged domination over the fate of Indian Muslims after 1857. This alliance hoped to restore a semblance of trust after the persecution of Muslims by the colonial government, who were seen as the chief instigators of the revolt of 1857. The development of this trust was crucial for implementing the project for uplifting the conditions of Indian Muslims.

To the end of ameliorating the social, educational and political conditions of Muslims, one of his early endeavors was the commencement of an Urdu journal entitled *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* (Cultivation of Morals) featuring articles by him and his like-minded supporters. His greater contribution is the establishment of Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh in 1875, modeled on Cambridge University, which offered English-medium higher education. In addition to these social and political efforts, Saiyid Ahmad also understood that the problem for the Muslim community wasn't just the loss of political power but a profound crisis that would entail reorientation of fundamental categories of

⁴⁰ Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan: 1857-1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 33.

knowledge and self-understanding. His revision of Islamic theology in light of “reason” and the discourse of natural theology was an effort in this direction.⁴¹

Discourse on Polygamy: Natural Theology

Saiyid Ahmad addressed the issue of polygamy in one of the essays, titled “On the question whether Islam has been Beneficial or Injurious to Human Society in General, and to the Mosaic and Christian Dispensations.”⁴² His ideas were developed in relation to the scientific discoveries that he felt were challenging Islam. The test of religious truth, according to Saiyid Ahmad, is conformity with the norms of natural reason and his attempt at ‘rationalization’ of religion is called “natural theology.”⁴³ He defines religion as:

true principle to which all the ideas and actions of man should be conformable (*sic*), so long as he retains the use of his physical and intellectual powers.....and that true principle, as far as man’s intellectual powers enable him to discover, is no other than Nature....The test, therefore, of the truth or of the falsity of various religions which prevail on earth, is the ascertaining whether they are or are not in accordance with this true principle.⁴⁴

He further explains nature as “that law, in conformity to which all objects around us, whether material or immaterial, receive their existence, and which determines the relation which they bear to each other.”⁴⁵ He writes that “as nature is true and perfect, this

⁴¹Altaf Hussain Hali, *Hayat-I Javed* (Immortal Life), translated by David J. Mathews (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1994); Hafeez Malik, *Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Christian W. Troll, *Saiyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978). For Aligarh Movement, see *David Lelyveld Aligarh’s First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴²Saiyid Ahmad Khan, “Whether Islam has been Beneficial.....,” *A Series of Essays*, Polygamy is discussed from page 147 to 152.

⁴³Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Aziz Ahmad *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁴⁴Saiyid Ahmad, *Life of Muhammad*, v.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, v.

principle must necessarily be true and perfect, and this true and perfect principle is what we call true religion.” In his ‘natural theology’, Saiyid Ahmad called God as the ‘lawgiver’ since “Nature is a law, and as a law necessarily implies a lawgiver, so, when we say *Nature*, we must not be understood to mean *Natura naturans* of the atheistical school, but only that *tout ensemble* of organic and inorganic existences, the production of *Causa causarum*, that is, God, that supreme and perfect.”⁴⁶

Saiyid Ahmad’s Islam does not encourage the practice of polygamy but it falls short of total denunciation of the practice. The use of permission to marry more than one wife, he argued, “was the privilege use being reserved for such as for physical reasons may stand in need of it, but in the absence of such an excuse the indulgence in it is wholly contrary to the virtues and morality taught by Islam.”⁴⁷ Saiyid Ahmad was, therefore, ambiguous on the question of polygamy and divided in his criticism of the practice.

He considers the subject of polygamy from three points of view, “Nature, Society and Religion.” In keeping with his ‘natural theology,’ he first argued that polygamy was in accordance with ‘the principles of nature.’ He said that those who are meant to be monogamous by ‘nature:’

bring forth their young, in pairs, one of the two being a male and the other a female. Those, on the other hand, that are intended to be polygamistic are delivered of one or more, no relative proportion of sex being observed. According to this law of nature man falls under the second head: but as, by his position, and by the rare and precious endowment of reason, is raised far above all other sentient beings, so he is required to use all those powers, and privileges bestowed upon him in common with the other beings around him, with caution, and in harmony with his physical, social and political liabilities, as well as with the laws of hygiene and the influence of the climate in which he lives.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Ibid., v.

⁴⁷Ibid, 147.

⁴⁸Ibid., 147-48.

Saiyid Ahmad also defended his position from a 'social and religious' point of view. For him, recourse to polygamy was 'justified' only by "real necessity." This 'necessity' was "perpetuation of one's kind or children." He argued that "when, from whatever cause, this helpmate (woman in marriage) fails to perform her natural duty, some remedy must surely have been appointed by the Creator to meet this exigency and that remedy is polygamy."⁴⁹ But for Saiyid Ahmad, this was not just a prerogative of the husband but also of the wife with the difference "that man can have recourse to this remedy when he so wills, while the wife must first obtain a legal authorization for the act."⁵⁰ What is crucial to note here is that fertility of a woman and reproduction were indispensable to the definition of marriage. Concepts of fertility and reproduction had social and religious implications, and practices and traditions of marriage and familial relationships were woven around sexuality and childbearing. Related to this understanding of marriage are notions of wifehood and motherhood. Only those women who can become "biological" mothers could belong to a monogamous marriage.

In explaining his position, Saiyid Ahmad defined marriage as a practice that counters loneliness of man since:

God saw that it was not good for man to be alone and he made a helpmate for him which is woman who is destined to share with him the cares and the amenities, the sorrows and pleasures of life....as the basis of man's individual and social happiness, whatever tends to lessen its influence must ever be regarded as a serious evil.⁵¹

⁴⁹Ibid., 148.

⁵⁰Ibid., 148.

⁵¹Ibid., 148.

For Saiyid Ahmad, the practice of polygamy was “not an unrestrained gratification of animal appetites” but permissible with restrictions and regulations such “as perfect equality of rights and privileges, love and affection among all wives etc.” and that:

these restrictions and regulations materially serve to prevent truly pious and religious person from indulging in polygamy, for they almost immediately discover that the availing themselves of this privilege, without fulfilling its conditions and observing its regulations, which are so strict as to be extremely difficult to be complied with.⁵²

In summary, one could argue that Saiyid Ahmad was critical of polygamy but also believed that it could be permitted for childbearing. This ambiguity, however, did not desensitize him to the question of rights and sentiments in marriage, and he further contended that polygamy must maintain ‘equality of rights and privileges.’

Syed Ameer Ali

Syed Ameer Ali (Ameer Ali) was born in a notable family at Chinsura in Bengal in 1849. He received English education in school during his childhood, and learnt Persian and Urdu from a maulvi who used to teach him in the evenings. He attended Hooghly College and graduated in 1867. He was one of the few students selected for scholarship to receive higher education in England and sailed for Britain in 1868. After his return to India in 1873, he started practicing law at the High Court of Calcutta and had a distinguished legal career in British India. In 1877, he founded the National Muhammadan Association and continued to be its secretary for twenty four years. The association formed a network of nearly thirty four branches in India covering provinces from Madras to Sind. Its name was later changed to Central National Muhammadan Association and it was the one of the first representative organization of Indian Muslims. In 1890 he was appointed a judge of the Bengal High Court, being the second Muslim to reach such a position in India. When Ameer Ali retired from the Calcutta bench in 1904

⁵²Ibid., 148-9.

he decided to leave India and settle down in England. In 1909, he acquired higher honors when he was given membership of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the first Indian to be raised to such a rank. He established the London branch of the All-India Muslim League in 1908 and lobbied for the creation of separate electorates for Muslims under provision of the Morley-Minto constitutional reforms of 1909. He was also involved in the Khilafat movement and along with Aga Khan, sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Turkey for the restoration of the Caliphate. He died in 1928 after a life of active interest in the political and cultural affairs of Muslims.⁵³

Ameer Ali's monumental book on Islam is *The Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Muhammad*, which he completed when he was only twenty four. Written for a primarily Western audience, Ameer Ali was persuaded to write on Islam and the life of Muhammad after reading James Clark's *Ten Great Religions*. He found the book to be "teeming with errors."⁵⁴ A revised edition of Ameer Ali's book was published in 1891 titled *Spirit of Islam*, intended this time, as he wrote in the preface "for the Indian Moslems". He writes:

I have endeavored to embody in these pages the philosophical and ethical spirit of Islam, in the hope that it may assist the Moslems of India to achieve their intellectual and moral regeneration under the auspices of the great European power that now holds their destinies in their hands.⁵⁵

⁵³This information is taken from K.K Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work* (Lahore: Publishers United, 1968). See also Syed Ameer Ali, *Aap Beeti* (reprint) (Karachi: Muktaba Asoob, 1984); Martin Forward, *The Failure of Islamic Modernism? Syed Ameer Ali's Interpretation of Islam* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1999); Rafiuddin Ahmad, *The Bengal Muslims: 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); Gail Minault, "Ameer Ali, Syed," in John L. Esposito, editor, *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 1, p. 84-85.

⁵⁴K.K Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work*, p. 7.

⁵⁵Ameer Ali, *Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals, with a life of the Prophet*, (London: W. H Allen, 1891), vii.

The only difference between the two editions is the inclusion of two more chapters, one on the Imamate called “The Apostolical Sucession” and the other on Islamic mysticism called “Idealistic and Mystical Spirit in Islam.”

Discourse on Polygamy: Historical Variability

In his book Ameer Ali discussed polygamy under ‘Status of Women in Islam’ to which he made no changes in the revised edition of 1890. Like Saiyid Ahmad, Ameer Ali does acknowledge the ‘conditional clause’ implicit in the Quranic injunction on Islam. But his critique of polygamy differs from Saiyid Ahmad’s in its strong emphasis on history instead of ‘nature’ as a basis of explanation. He first presents an overview of the practice of polygamy in different cultures ranging from Persians, Spartans, Romans, Babylonians, Athenians and Romans, at different historical periods to establish that “history, proves conclusively that, until very recent times, polygamy was not considered so reprehensible as it is now.”⁵⁶ He then goes on to argue against Christian evangelicals who insist that polygamy was legalized by Prophet Mohammad saying that:

the greatest and most reprehensible mistake committed by Christian writers is to suppose that Mohammad either adopted or legalized polygamy. The old idea of his having introduced it, a sign only of the ignorance of those who entertained that notion, is by this exploded; but the opinion that he adopted and legalized the custom is still maintained by the common masses, as well as by many of the learned in Christendom. No belief can be more false.⁵⁷

Ameer Ali contends that polygamy was inhumanely practiced widely in pre-Islamic Arabia as well as its neighboring countries. It was Muhammad’s mission, by limiting the number of marriages, by giving rights and privileges to wives against their husbands and by making equity in marriage obligatory through which he struck at the unchecked and

⁵⁶Ameer Ali, *Life of Mohammad*, 223.

⁵⁷Ibid., 224.

harmful prevalence of the practice of polygamy.⁵⁸ Underscoring a historical perspective, he adds that:

the fact must be borne in mind that the existence of polygamy depends on circumstances. Certain times, certain conditions of society make its practice absolutely needful.... But with the progress of thought, with the change of conditions ever going on in this world, the necessity for polygamy, or more properly polygyny, disappears, and its practice is tacitly abandoned or expressly forbidden.⁵⁹

Following this contention, Ameer Ali argues that in countries where the means for women to help themselves exist, this practice has come to be regarded as evil while in those societies where such circumstances are non-existent “where the means, which in civilized communities enable women to help themselves, are absent or wanting, polygamy must necessarily continue to exist.”⁶⁰ He then proceeds to explain that Muhammed’s marriages were political ties to connect various rival families and powerful tribes together, and that “during the lifetime of Khadija the Prophet married no other wife, notwithstanding that public opinion among his people would have allowed him to do so, had he chosen.”⁶¹

Ameer Ali’s approach to the issue of polygamy also reflects his judgment of unfair customs or practices that would become a target for ‘reformers.’ For him:

evil is a relative term and primarily, quite in accordance with the moral conceptions of societies and individuals; but progress of ideas and changes in the condition of a people may make it evil in its tendency and in process of time it may be made by the state, illegal.⁶²

⁵⁸Ibid., 224.

⁵⁹Ibid., 227.

⁶⁰Ibid., 227.

⁶¹Ibid., 229.

⁶²Ibid., 236.

Invoking a sort of historical relativism, he maintains that the ethical judgment of usages and customs is contingent on “the circumstances, or as they are or are not in accordance with the conscience- ‘the spirit’- of the time, is a fact much ignored by superficial thinkers.”⁶³

Ameer Ali criticized polygamy from a very different perspective than Saiyid Ahmad. For him, history passed the verdict on ‘traditions’ that needed to be ‘reformed’ and while polygamy was appropriate for Muhammad’s time, it must disappear in communities where women had acquired education and rights. It must be added that Ameer Ali agreed with Saiyid Ahmad on the conditional clause requiring justice to all partners in polygamy and believed that this condition “may be considered as prohibitive of a plurality of wives.”⁶⁴

Defense of Polygamy: Maulvi Mohammad Abdul Ghani

We have so far looked at thinkers who engaged and thoughtfully deliberated on the relationship between marriage, religion and history. Instead of an outright condemnation or praise of either ‘tradition’ or ‘reform,’ they tried to balance change with continuity, religion with ‘secular’ ideologies and confidence in the past with uncertainties of the present. But polygamy was not just addressed by prominent thinkers but also lesser known literate men who commented on social and political questions of that age. Maulvi Mohammad Abdul Ghani thoroughly defended polygamy in a lecture entitled ‘Polygamy’ in 1891 given at the sixth anniversary of the formation of Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam. Maulvi Mohammad Abdul Ghani was one of its most important members in the early years of its establishment and was closely associated with the founding of Islamiya

⁶³Ibid., 236.

⁶⁴Ibid., 226.

College in 1891 where he taught and by early twentieth century became its principal. He presided over the General Council of Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam in 1905.⁶⁵ He was the Secretary of Young Men's Mohammadan Association and also the secretary of the Educational Committee of Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam.

Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam was established in 1884 with an objective to propagate and strengthen 'Islamic' values. It is said that in March 1884 in the garden near Delhi Gate, Lahore, a Christian missionary while speaking in support of Christianity uttered a few invectives against Muhammad. In the audience, there was a man named Munshi Chiraghdin who stood up in protest, and said that a Muslim can tolerate anything except a blasphemy against the Prophet. He was shouted at by other people present there and thrown out of the meeting. Following the incident, Chiraghdin visited the house of Muhammad Qazim (who later on rose to the position of Deputy Post Master and came to be called Khan bahadur) to discuss the incident. Along with a major *alim*, Shamshuddin Shayakh, he started regular meetings where they would discuss the strategies to meet the threat perceived by the growing presence of missionary activity. Initially there was little success because many would be scared of taking a position against the missionaries, all the more as the conditions of Muslims in general in those days, as they would argue, was not strong. Some people, however, thought that following the efforts of Saiyid Ahmad, the condition of Muslims was taking a turn towards the better and it was still possible to meet the 'threat.' Six months later, an organization called Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam was established for the following purpose. Its aim was to stem the tide of preaching missionaries, and publish books related to Islam. It was also to establish institutions for

⁶⁵This information is taken from Muhammad Hanif Shahid, *Iqbal aur Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam*. (Lahore: Kutab Khane Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam, 1976), p. 36-7, 184.

‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ education of Muslims, provide succor to Muslim orphans and support their education and tutoring.⁶⁶

As an active member of Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam, Abdul Ghani spoke on polygamy on its sixth anniversary citing four reasons for choosing this subject. Firstly, he mentioned that polygamy was “one of the most important social questions of Islam and hence of special importance and interest.” Secondly, he worried that it was “one of those doctrines which have been most misunderstood by the general Mohammadan community. There are some who allow, or indulge in an indefinite multiplication of wives, while on the other hand, there are those who condemn polygamy as the most despicable practice.”⁶⁷ Thirdly, he added that it was one of those points in Islam that was especially attacked by those who did not profess Islam and appeared as a huge flaw to the non-Muslims. And finally, Abdul Ghani hoped to speak to the “young educated Mohammadans who evince a marked ignorance of their religion, at once come to the conclusion that polygamy is one of its weakest points, and so they begin to criticize their religion with reference to this point or to other points which they have equally misunderstood.”⁶⁸

The position of Abdul Ghani is sexist compared to Saiyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali and is completely devoid of ambiguity or doubt on this question. He sets out to defend polygamy based on his definition of marriage and “natural difference” between men and women. For him, the chief object of marriage is the “propagation of the kind under most

⁶⁶Ibid., 24-5. Also see David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 77.

⁶⁷Maulvi Mohammad Abdul Ghani, *Polygamy: A Lecture* (Lahore: The Mohammadan Tract and Book Depot, 1891), 1.

⁶⁸Ibid., 2.

favorable conditions....for it there were no marriage, multiplication of human beings, and practically the whole world, would come to an end.”⁶⁹ He further argues that it is only “legal marriage” that can achieve this end most fruitfully or children will grow fatherless and there will be “no education, no training, no system: and culture, whether intellectual, moral or spiritual.”⁷⁰

In order to substantiate his claim for this function of marriage, Abdul Ghani argues for “the doctrine of the relative position of man and woman.”⁷¹ Cast in an extremely patriarchal tone, the tract argues that “men and women are two agents who have to carry out by their cooperation the all-important command-Increase and multiply and replenish the earth’ and for this reason they have been given different organs.”⁷² Furthermore, he asserts for the “natural superiority” of the male sex based on characteristics that in “woman is far below man.” Under these characteristics, he includes physical strength and intellectual and spiritual capacities that are “restricted” in women due to “natural” causes of menstruation, pregnancy and childbearing.⁷³

Abdul Ghani’s defense of polygamy contains unequivocal and absolute statements that uphold patriarchy. He divides the reasons for polygamy into “essential” and “accidental” ones. Under “essential” reasons, he insists that “there can be no reason why a perfectly healthy and strong man whose wife, although she has got children, has attained her turn of life, should not, if he is still able to procreate, marry a second wife,

⁶⁹Ibid., 3.

⁷⁰Ibid., 4.

⁷¹Ibid., 4.

⁷²Ibid., 4.

⁷³Ibid., 6-7.

when he wishes to do so, and feels himself able to bear all the troubles consequent on such marriages.” In addition to this claim, he also opines that “during the period of women’s pregnancy man can impregnate another woman” driven by “physiology and nature” since “he cannot help himself any more than woman can help her conception, her pregnancy and similar other functions, which it is her lot to serve.”⁷⁴

The “accidental” reasons are those created by circumstances where the couple are unable to bear children or have only female children. For Abdul Ghani, a marriage that falls short of “propagation of species... is either a marriage to be superceded (*sic*) or at least a marriage that requires superaddition.”⁷⁵

Abdul Ghani’s defense of polygamy was based on biological determinism that stressed ‘sexual difference’ and turned this “physiology” into a norm for social organization and managing human social relationships. Unlike Saiyid Ahmad or Ameer Ali, he lacks insightful analysis of either Islam or its history and his sole purpose was to “scientifically” validate polygamy through a discourse of biology and reproduction.

Summary

The discourses of Saiyid Ahmad, Ameer Ali and Abdul Ghani indicate that there was no singular approach to the question of polygamy. It was neither a complete condemnation nor a defense based on “Islamic” principles, as some Christian evangelicals like William Muir had accused. While Saiyid Ahmad argued that polygamy was acceptable only for childbearing, a discourse that would be replicated later in the twentieth century in *Iqbal Dulhan*, Ameer Ali emphasized that the practice must be situated historically and condemned in current times when opportunities for education

⁷⁴Ibid., 11.

⁷⁵Ibid., 12.

and greater equality were becoming available for women. The presence of Abdul Ghani's defense of polygamy based on parochial definitions of masculinity and femininity reveals that some responded to the increasing criticism of polygamy with a greater assertion of the practice. The unifying factor in all their arguments, however, is that it was constituted around a religious discourse of Islamic theology.

The religious discourses of the nineteenth century were articulated through the medium of the commentary which required constant interpretation and discussion. This discursive construction was a legacy of premodern *ulama* culture involving exegeses medieval texts. During the colonial period, sacred authority was fragmented and commentaries on Islam included a wide range of perspectives. Sacred authority allowed Muslims to preserve as well as refashion Islam and Muslim identity. The polemic of religious leaders presented multiple readings of the practice of polygamy in Muslim societies, and in most of these debates, it was not unusual to base the position on an interpretation of scriptural sources. This association of scriptures and texts as a marker of religious identity was a specific feature of colonial rule. Gender therefore was very integral to the reconstitution of religious identity and the practice of religion. Of greater interest to the argument in this thesis is that opinions on polygamy indicate that "private" familial matters were constitutive of "public" debate on religion.

Religious commentaries, however, were not the only building blocks of 'public' private sphere. Urdu literature was the other discursive site where polygamy was debated and in fact, was subject to greater and more extensive exposition than religious commentaries. This next chapter on Urdu literature continues our discussion of 'public' private sphere amongst North Indian Muslims of the colonial period.

Literature and Social Transformation

How can literature help us in understanding history? Are literary texts permissible as historical evidence and what could be some grounds for objection? Partha Chatterjee has discussed the influence of the popular narrative on recent writings of social and political history. Tracking the history of the discipline in India, Chatterjee demonstrates how professionalization of history in Indian universities as a scientific discipline generated its own principles of authority and validation which excluded the popular narrative outside the academy viewing it as uninformed and uneducated.⁷⁶ The contours of ‘non-academic’ history, argues Chatterjee, ranged from writings in newspapers and magazines to the performances and artifacts of popular culture. However, with the passage of time, it is the history produced in the cultural realm that has come to challenge most successfully the scientific history of postcolonial India. Chatterjee does not attribute this transformation to disciplinary fashions of the Western academy but the proliferation of educational institutions within India and major political movements of the 1980s in particular the rise of the Hindu Right. These developments enforced the desire to find a way out of ‘scientific’ history and revised disciplinary practices to produce historiography more open to the domain of the popular.⁷⁷

The stretching of the boundaries of ‘scientific’ history in order to integrate meanings and narratives produced in cultural spaces of society has opened history to ideas and

⁷⁶Partha Chatterjee, “Introduction: History and the Present” in *History and the Present* ed. Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 12.

⁷⁷Ibid., 14-15.

influences from other disciplines. The use of literature in history rests on the belief that literature records a people's past and sustains their cultural identity; their literary past is preserved and fostered by writers, folklorists and novelists. There are three major processes that can be noted for the literary history of Urdu literature: first is the conceptualization of "novel" as a distinct literary practice by late nineteenth century, second is the use of novel for the expression of major interests and concerns of the *ashraf* community and third is the implementation of the novel to remake gender relations in particular the role of women in society.

Literary works were not only works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms but also attempts to redefine the social order. In this view, novels and stories should be studied because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment. Literary texts as agents of cultural formation can reveal, at a discursive and linguistic level, the social and political forces dominant during that period. In Urdu literature, the genre of novel was a method in persuasion and was directly associated with social transformation.⁷⁸ *Mir'at al-arus* by Nazir Ahmed Dehlavi (1836-1912), a close associate of Saiyid Ahmad Khan, published in 1869 was the first novel to make a plea for education for women. The plot of the novel is based on a clear distinction between the public and the private spheres. It tells the story of two sisters from an 'ashraf' Delhi family: Akbari and Asghari. Akbari, the elder, is uneducated, superstitious and shrewd. Asghari, on the other hand, is educated, wise, respectful of her elders and a model homemaker. She carefully manages relations within the household and never

⁷⁸Sughra Mehdi, *Urdu Novelien Main Aurat ki Samaji Haisiyat* (Delhi: Sajjad Publishing House, 2002), 8.

transgresses the rules of a secluded society. The educated woman was therefore not just a skilled homemaker but someone who never violated the physical boundaries of private sphere. Nazir Ahmad wrote extensively and is a leading literary and reformist figure in the second half of the nineteenth century. Four of Nazir Ahmad's seven novels were concerned with the problems of women. Like *Mirat al-arus*, his novel *Taubat-un-Nasuh* also dealt with the education of women. The other two novels were concerned with patriarchy and male domination of women, by allowing men to have a second wife (*Fasana Mubtala*, 1885) and by not allowing widows to remarry (*Ayyama*, 1891).⁷⁹

Other writers during this period also wrote on the role of women within the domestic context and its relation to education. Similar to Nazir Ahmed's *Mirat al-arus*, Altaf Hussain Hali wrote *Majlis un-nisa* in 1897 where educated women were the real managers of the household and essential for the survival of the family and the community.⁸⁰

The influence of Nazir Ahmad is also visible in his family. His son Bashiruddin Ahmad wrote *Iqbal Dulhan* in 1908 and acknowledged his literary and intellectual debt to his father especially the influence of *Mirat al-Arus* on *Iqbal Dulhan*. He rated *Mirat al-Arus* highly stating that there "have been many imitations of that book but none has achieved the success of that novel. Even I have tried to emulate a similar style and

⁷⁹For an extensive discussion of Nazir Ahmad's life and work, see Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi, *Maulvi Nazir Ahmad Dehlavi: Ahval-o-Asar* (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi Pasand, 1971). Also see Mushirul Hasan, *A Moral Reckoning: Muslim Intellectuals in Nineteenth-century Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) and C. M Naim, "Prize-winning *Adab*: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Islam*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 290-314.

⁸⁰For discussion of Hali's novels, see Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (N.J: Zed Books, 1992) and *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam*, trans. by Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

attempted to tread a comparable route.” Following his father, he also wrote several didactical treatises about family and women, including *Iqbal Dulhan*. Hoping to follow in the footsteps of his father, he comments that “I have been thinking for years to walk the same path and build on the foundation that he had established. Therefore, this book (*Iqbal Dulhan*) belonging to the same genre is presented for the pleasure of readers.”⁸¹

It is often mistakenly believed that it was mostly men who wrote on women but women too were active in the debates on education and family beginning from the late nineteenth century. These women were educated either at home by an ‘ustani’ (female teacher) or at a school. As mentioned in the introduction, Urdu literature is valuable to the historian because it provides a unique opportunity to recover the voices of women. The question of whether and how the “voice” can be heard has become an issue of lively discussion. Some like Spivak have gone so far as to suggest that the South Asian woman has no voice and “cannot speak.”⁸² Others have emphasized innovative methods like listening to her folktales, her poetry and her songs, and to try to decipher the subversive messages that they contain.⁸³ For the historian, the written narratives of novels provide a window into the lives of women, although it is restricted to the higher middle class and *ashraf* community. Despite this flaw, they can be used for answering questions about the cultural constructions of feminine identity and how it was experienced by women writers.

Some of the prominent female voices who challenged patriarchy included Muhammadi Begum, Akbari Begum, Nazr Sajjad Hyder and the lesser known but

⁸¹Bashiruddin Ahmed, *Iqbal Dulhan* (Delhi: Khari Bavli, 1908), 3.

⁸²Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-316.

⁸³Lila Abu Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

extremely significant Rashid-un-nisa. Rashid-un-nisa was the first female novelist in Urdu. She wrote *Islah- un-Nisa* (Reform of Women) in 1881, the publication of which was arranged over twelve years later in 1894 by her son Muhammad Sulaiman after his return from England. Rashid-un-nisa's family was associated with the Urdu writer Imdad Imam Asar. Literary avocation, therefore, was not alien to her. She resolved to write the novel after recognizing the urgency of criticism of conditions of women in *ashraf* households. In the preface of her novel *Islah-un-Nisa*, Rashid-un-nisa describes a conversation she had with other *ashraf* women. They despair that in *ashraf* families, "women rarely experience happiness" and that the kind of hostility and distrust they see "between husband and wife, sister-in-laws and mother-in-laws" is unheard of in any other community. About marriage, they say that "within days bitterness and arguments begin. Some groom after marriage says that he has been victimized by his mother, that father was not supportive [of the marriage], some one else says that mother was not in agreement. Or that my father mistreated me." Rashid- un-nisa writes that during the conversation they all agreed that there was a necessity to discuss these issues. "Everyone agreed with my opinion; all these things had destructive effect on the household and there was a need to discuss them." Furthermore, she wrote that, "on their suggestion, I also felt that a book be written where such practices [superstitious rituals] are discussed, the destructive effect they have on households and the causes of friction and conflict."⁸⁴

Rashid-un-Nisa is a precursor to that generation of women who were educated at schools and advocated various social causes such as the spread of literacy and improved health care in journals and magazines. One of the women in this generation was Akbari Begum, aunt of the better known Nazr Sajjad Hyder, mother of the legendary Qurratulain

⁸⁴Rashid un-Nisa, *Islah un-nisa*. (Reprint) (2007:Khudabaksh Library, Patna)., 9-11.

Hyder. Nazr Sajjad grew up in a Shia family in Sialkot, Punjab in the 1890s. Educated at home, she started contributing to the journal *Tahzib un-Niswan* at a young age and came to be known among *tahibi behin*, the sisterhood of readers of the journal. She continued to contribute articles and stories to Urdu journals and in 1910 became the editor of *Phool*, a publication especially for girls. In her writings, Nazr Sajjad reflected on the exceptional conditions of women and advocated women's education and other freedoms for women. Her major novels include *Ah-e Mazluman* in 1918, *Hirman Nasib* in 1920 and *Surayya* in 1930.⁸⁵

Akbari Begum came from an illustrious Saiyid family of Muradabad, a well known city situated in the northwestern region in modern Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. Her father Mir Mazhar Ali, also Nazr Sajjad's grand father, lived in Sialkot, a town now in Pakistan. Akbari was born here some time in the 1870s (date is uncertain). She was given the name Kaniz Abbas at the time of her birth, but was better known as Akbari Begum. She wrote under the pseudonym Valid-i Afzal Ali (Mother of Afzal Ali) in consideration of the practice of strict *purdah*, regarded as an integral part of female living. Printing under a female name was considered a violation of the norms of gender segregation and women presented themselves in writing as 'mother of' someone making literary profession more acceptable. Akbari did not have a formal modern education but had a very good training in the traditional sciences. After her marriage, Akbari moved to Lahore, where her husband, a cousin of hers, had a government job. One of her brothers, Mir Faiz-ul-Askari attended university, while another, Mir Nazr-ul-Baqer, Nazr Sajjad's

⁸⁵For an analysis of her novels, see Shaista Ikramullah, *A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Mujeeb Khan, "Nazr Sajjad Hyder ki Novel Nigari" in *Kargah-i-Shishgari* (Delhi: Modern Publishing House, 2005). Also see Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

father, was in army and was posted outside India. Nazr-ul-Baqer was amongst the first Indian Muslims to support the modern education for women, and was a major source of inspiration both to his sister and his daughter Nazr Sajjad.⁸⁶

Qurratulain Hyder mentions some crucial events in the life of Akbari Begum that inspired her to write stories about women. Akbari Begum's family, though fully settled in Lahore in Punjab visited their ancestral home in Muradabad, Uttar Pradesh during festivals and family rituals. On one such occasion in 1903 when she along with several members of her extended family were in Muradabad, she observed keenly the rites and superstitious beliefs connected with the old social practices, which had close bearing on women's life. During this visit, Qurratulain Hyder reports:

Akbari Begum met her 80 year old maternal aunt in the *haveli* (mansion) of her grand father in Chaukuen, and observed her [plight]. She had been married much before the mutiny of 1857, but as it was believed that she got possessed by a jinn the very first day of her wedding, she was not allowed to leave for her husband's house and live with him. She thus was constrained to stay back home, virtually confined to her prayer carpet (*musalla*), engaged all the time in litanies, repeating the name of Allah alone all through her life. Akbari saw that while the women in the inner apartments of the house in the family were generally afflicted with diseases like tuberculosis, hysteria and malecholia, the men outside engaged in pursuit of pleasures, busy in gambling like *ganjafa* and *chausar*. Muradabad was then known as Vienna of India where noted musicians of the country came and entertained the men in the society.⁸⁷

Akbari Begum thus returned to Lahore, Hyder continues, with plenty of materials for her novels, *Guldasta-e Muhabbat*, *Sho'la-e Pinhan*, *Iffat-e Niswan* and of course the most noted of them, *Godar ka Lal*. *Gudast-e Muhabbat* was her first novel and was published under a male pseudonym, Abbas Murtaza. *Godar ke Lal* was published in 1907.

⁸⁶Qurratulain Hyder, *Karen Jahan Daraz Hai* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2003), 150-154.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 151.

After the death of her husband in 1914 Akbari Begum lived with her son, Afzal Ali, who held important government office and was also a prominent writer of the time. He wrote for literary magazines like *Makhzan*. By the year 1928, writes Qurratulain Hyder, “Akbari Begum had finished her work. Over a quarter of century back, she had stood up to reform the society. The Indian society by now had gone far ahead of the message contained in *Godar ke Lal*. The world was no longer in need of her services.”⁸⁸ She thus breathed her last in 1928 and was buried in Dera Ismail Khan, where her son was then posted.

In addition to novels, the proliferation of journals for women formed a community of readers and writers and a forum for expressing views on marriage, divorce, education and work. Visionaries of different perspectives conversed with each other through print. For instance, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali founded the weekly newspaper *Tahzib un-niswan* (The Women’s Reformer) in Lahore in 1898 together with his second wife, Muhammadi Begum. He has a pioneering role in the history of Urdu journalism. Later in 1908, another prolific writer, Rashidul Khairi also launched a magazine *Ismat* to speak on issues that interested women. Along with journalism, he also authored novels including *Subh-i-Zindagi* (The Morning of Life), and *Sham-i-Zindagi*, published in 1907 and 1917 respectively.⁸⁹

The increasing appearance of women in the public discourse and the emphasis on the domain of the family as the site for the feminine is a characteristic feature of the Muslim discourse in north India since the 1870s. Novels and stories and articles in journals told

⁸⁸Ibid., 154.

⁸⁹Gail Minault, “Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and *Tahzib un-Niswan*: Women’s Rights in Islam and Women’s Journalism in Urdu,” in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, ed. Kenneth W. Jones (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 179-99.

didactic tales of a planned domestic economy and the need for an educated and educating mother. They taught readers what kind of behavior to emulate or shun, the function of these scenarios was heuristic and didactic rather than artistic; they provided a basis for remaking the social and political order in which events took place. The print public sphere provided a dynamic platform for discussion of issues of myriad variety related to women and family. The campaigns for women's education or against polygamy may qualify as "private" because they entailed rearrangement of familial relations but the discussions which accompanied them, were certainly "public," enabled hugely by the coming of the print.

We now turn to the three novels which discuss the issue of polygamy in this "public" private sphere: *Iqbal Dulhan* by Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Godar ka Lal* by Akbari Begum and *Ah-e-Mazluman* by Nazr Sajjad Hyder.

Analysis of the Novels

The novels are discussed under themes of respectability amongst the *ashraf* class, the nature of discourse on polygamy involving a legitimization of the practice and finally on the depiction of the relationship between the first and the second wife in *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Godar ka Lal*. Due to the fundamental dissimilarity from *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Godar ka Lal* in its approach to polygamy, a separate section on the rejection of polygamy is devoted to *Ah-e-Mazluman*.

Concerns of the Ashraf: Respectability through Education

Both *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Godar ka Lal* depict protagonists as ideal characters who display praiseworthy behavior that was to be inculcated in the *ashraf* community through education. The perfection and nobility of the protagonist in *Iqbal Dulhan* as well as many

other Urdu novels was centered on worries for ‘respectability’ characteristic of the *ashraf* Muslims. The novel *Iqbal Dulhan* follows the life of Iqbal Mirza who is born and raised in an *ashraf* family of Delhi in early twentieth century. Similar to the didactic novels of Nazir Ahmad, the protagonist of *Iqbal Dulhan* is a man fit to be emulated. Conscious of the death of his father at a tender age, he steadfastly and diligently completes his education at Aligarh and also earns a scholarship to acquire higher education in Cambridge. In his childhood, he remains obedient to his mother, and in adulthood he maintains a courteous relationship with her and other elder members of the family. In addition to his steady relationships, he also honors religion and his cultural heritage placing a high value on adherence to basic principles of Islam.

This interest in ‘respectability’ has been highlighted in a recent article by Ruby Lal where she argues that the main purpose of Nazir Ahmad’s program of education, articulated in his novels, was not social change or altering ‘tradition’ but “recuperation of respectability.”⁹⁰ Ruby Lal argues that the insistent talk of reform in Nazir Ahmad’s work “makes sense only in a context of a shift from a court to a *kachahri* culture, and the ‘class anxiety’ on the part of *ashraf* to preserve respectability for themselves when there was very little access to well established benchmarks of courtly/*sharif* behavior.”⁹¹ In the face of fundamental political and ideological challenges brought about by colonial rule in India, various kinds of adjustments and reconstruction needed to be made. In this

⁹⁰Ruby Lal, “Gender and Sharafat: Rereading Nazir Ahmad,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Volume 18, Part 1 (2008): 15-30.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 16.

reconstruction, notions of respectability were institutionalized in new forms through programs of social uplift and education.⁹²

This concern with education which preserves respectability amongst the *ashraf* is also visible in *Godar ka Lal*. *Godar ka Lal*, described and introduced as '*Khawateen aur Ladkiyon ke Liye aik Naseehat Khez Novel*' (A Didactic Novel for Women and Girls), is a dense and multilayered novel that tackles numerous questions simultaneously such as the literacy and education of women, incompatible marriage, polygamy and other dilemmas associated with family relationships. The society depicted in the novel highlights the struggle between the 'new' lifestyle, on the one hand, where education and employment were new markers of 'respectability,' and the more conventional family structure, on the other hand, where marriage especially of young women occurred at an early age and education at higher levels after adulthood was seen as a violation of notions of filial honor and duty. The novel reflects this conflict within the same generation and between cousins. Zinat-un-nisa and Qamar-un-Nnisa (Qamar) are the two sisters, the brother's name is not mentioned but sister-in-law Amir un-nisa (Amir) is the head of the household. Qamar has two sons, Hamid Ali and Yusuf Raza, and a daughter, Khair-un-Nisa. Amir has four children: two sons, Khair Ali and Hasan Raza, and two daughters, Maqbool and Surayya. These cousins have intermarried. Khair Ali is married to Khair-un-nisa and Maqbool is married to Yusuf Raza.

Surayya and Hassan Raza are the prototype of the 'respectable' protagonist common to *ashraf* novels. They are astute in understanding human relationships, adjust to demanding situations and most importantly desire a good education to acquire greater

⁹²Ibid., 21.

social mobility. Both Hasan Raza and Surayya leave for Lahore to carry on their education. In contrast to Surayya, Maqbool, her sister is not well educated and grows to be a “bad” wife and an “indifferent” mother. The contrast between Maqbool and Surayya is similar to that of Asghari and Akbari observed in *Mirat ul-Arus*. Maqbool is represented as lazy, gossipy and unconcerned with the care and well-being of her family members. Unlike *Mirat ul-Arus* however, *Godar ka Lal* explores the implications of this incongruity in education between Surayya and Maqbool in extensive detail. Yusuf Raza’s first marriage is with Maqbool and proves to be a total ill match to the college going Yusuf Raza. The consequences of this marriage cause Yusuf Raza to have a second marriage, with Mehr Jabeen, a highly educated woman. In *Godar ka Lal*, the discrepancy in education not only between women but between men and women thus defines the contours of an “incompatible marriage.” This discrepancy points to a larger problem at the center of ‘modernity’ in the *ashraf* community of India. It turned the familial space into a domain of greater discord and dispute where women and men were confronted with ever greater challenges involving adjustment, accommodation and compromise. The marriage of Yusuf Raza end in polygamy and Akbari Begum argues for a dynamic of friendship between co-wives, resembling the story of *Iqbal Dulhan*.

Legitimate Polygamy: Discourse of a Second Marriage

Both *Godar ka Lal* and *Iqbal Dulhan* argue, although differently, that under certain conditions polygamy is acceptable and even required. On the other hand, *Ah-e-Mazluman* (Sighs of the Oppressed) is a complete and total condemnation of the practice of polygamy.

The notion of ‘legitimate polygamy’ in *Godar ka Lal* and *Iqbal Dulhan* reveals the ambiguous position on polygamy that had come to characterize the discourse of most reformers. As we saw earlier, during the nineteenth century, scholars of Islam like Saiyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali drew extensively from Islamic theology and history to present equivocal perspectives on the practice of polygamy.

In *Iqbal Dulhan*, legitimate polygamy provides a discursive site for the convergence of “private” aspects of people’s lives like marriage and reproduction and more “public” and political aspects related to discussions of Muslim identity and Islam. The presence of a religious argument on polygamy continued in 1908 and signified that religion held the same or greater importance for people and provided a center for identity and group loyalty.

Bashiruddin Ahmad first expresses his views on marriage and polygamy when a wedding proposal for Iqbal Mirza arrives from a family of orthodox Muslims where the bride’s grandfather is a respectable maulvi of Delhi. The proposal contains an *iqrarnama* or agreement that the groom’s family is expected to approve if they are to proceed with the marriage. The agreement contained a clause against polygamy where a polygamous marriage by Iqbal Mirza would be unacceptable to the first wife as well as her family. Iqbal Mirza rejects the clause and makes the classical Muslim patriarchal argument defending polygamy since it is justified in the Quran. He insists that:

The person who attaches this condition and the person who agreed to it are not Muslims in my opinion, as this is obviously contrary to the Quranic injunction. God has allowed Muslims to have upto four wives. How does the Maulvi sahib have the right to nullify the divine command. The permission for four wives amongst Muslims is on the condition of justice and equal treatment and this is really difficult to practice, if not absolutely impossible. A wise man with even a little sense of consequence would not take undergo

this trouble, and drag himself into this predicament.....In the Quran, God forbid, there can never be anything meaningless or bereft of the public good.⁹³

In spite of this reading, Bashiruddin Ahmad does add that “those who take undue advantage of this conditional divine injunction, which by no means implies that it is not practiced, are culprits.”⁹⁴ Therefore, men who have a second marriage out of contempt for women or only for sexual interest are condemnable, and insult religion. This assertion is used throughout the novel to distinguish between ‘acceptable’ reasons for marriage as opposed to base ones. Those who engage in latter situations have hearts like “stones ensconce in human flesh. They are not human and are totally deprived of compassion and empathy.”⁹⁵ This animosity towards ‘bad polygamy’ raises the question of ‘good’ or ‘acceptable’ polygamous unions. Or more specifically, under what conditions should polygamy be allowed or be called ‘legitimate?’ The notion of ‘legitimate polygamy’ cannot be understood without clarifying the beliefs about ‘ideal’ marriage expressed in *Iqbal Dulhan*. A marriage is considered ‘ideal’ only when the couple can raise a family and continue a familial ‘heritage.’ Therefore, polygamy is permissible only when the couple cannot, for some reason, have children. Thus:

The real purpose of marriage is breeding and unbroken succession of lineage. When this very purpose is lost, then this world and everything in it loses its worth and meaning. As the proverb goes, a person dies rejected and discarded leaving no one behind to pray for him. (mar gaye mardood jiske fatiha na darood). On his death bed, no one offers him water to drink and after his death, there is none to remember. The joy of having a child mitigates all the bitterness and ordeals of life..... It is altogether a different issue if one is destined to never have a child but this is rare. However, the man should not give up the effort, the success is in God’s hands. It is in such an eventuality that a second marriage is permissible, and this is in complete accord with human nature.⁹⁶

⁹³Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Iqbal Dulhan*, 83-4.

⁹⁴Ibid., 85.

⁹⁵Ibid., 85.

⁹⁶Ibid., 86.

This paragraph shows how the family was thought about and lived, and how profoundly fertility, reproduction and childbearing were the focus of that conception. In the discourses on polygamy by Saiyid Ahmad and Abdul Ghani, childbearing is one genuine and rightful cause for polygamy to be practiced. Reproduction has been acknowledged as a metaphor for survival, for linking past generations to an increasingly uncertain future. In *Iqbal Dulhan*, reproduction and childbearing linger as pervasive themes. The role of reproduction in women's life opportunities, gender division of labor, dominant/ subordinate gender relations and relationship of people and economic forces has long been recognized in feminist and historical research. Studies on what has recently been called the "politics of reproduction" have focused on important relations between supposedly private activities such as childbirth and child-rearing and public activities such as political debate and discourse.⁹⁷ The prevalence of fertility and reproduction both in Saiyid Ahmad's and Abdul Ghani's discourse as well as in *Iqbal Dulhan* highlights the need for their integration into historical approaches on family studies in South Asian history. Indeed, *Iqbal Dulhan* shows the extraordinary status of childbearing and children in how people experienced the family. Reproduction and fertility were, therefore, essential to the common interests of the family and also the religious community. The Quranic injunction of 'marry two, three or four' was understood to be a "solution" to the

⁹⁷Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett, "Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives," *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): 381-404; Gisela Bock and Pat Thanes, ed. *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of European Welfare States 1880-1950s*. (New York: Routledge, 1991); Susan Gal and Gail Kligamn, "Reproduction as Politics" in *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, "The Politics of Reproduction," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20 (1991): 311-43; Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider, *Festival of the Poor: Fertility Decline and the Ideology of Class in Sicily, 1860-1980* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Mary E. Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation," *Representations* 87 (2004): 43-81.

social “problem” of an infertile marriage and therefore “in complete accord with human nature.”

The concept of ‘legitimate polygamy’ is also employed in *Godar ka Lal*. Following the departure of Hasan Raza and Surayya for Lahore, the marriage of Yusuf Raza and Maqbool is arranged, much against the wishes of Yusuf, by the elders of the family in particular Khair Ali. Due to the poor education of Maqbool, significant parts of the chapters of the novel are devoted to the inability of Maqbool in running the household efficiently, and her incompetence and failure to maintain a clean and tidy house or cook well for Yusuf and his family. Moreover, she is not very pious and does not offer her prayers regularly. These mannerisms of Maqbool lead to estrangement between her and Yusuf. The birth of a daughter further worsens the relations between Maqbool and Yusuf, and Maqbool is portrayed as a “bad” mother.⁹⁸

The character of Maqbool echoes the argument that education of women was primarily to transform them into better mothers or wives or daughters, as people subjected to instruction by men.⁹⁹ It is argued that one of the characteristics of the new middle class vision of family was an increasing emphasis on the role of women as childrearers. Tasks that had been hitherto dispersed- to wetnurses, nannies, servants, fathers, neighbors, relatives and others- were gathered up under the rubric of maternal responsibility. Concomitantly, reproduction, one of many activities associated with

⁹⁸Akbari Begum, *Godar ka Lal*, 70-89.

⁹⁹Afsaneh Najmabadi makes an interesting argument for female education in modern Iran where she contends that gendered curriculum led to ‘professionalisation’ of motherhood and wifedom and the production of the woman of modernity provided both regulatory and emancipatory impulses. Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Creating an Educated Housewife in Iran” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 91-125.

women- and not exclusively with them- became the defining aspect of their characters and their lives.¹⁰⁰ In *Godar ka Lal*, the rift between Maqbool and Yusuf becomes the ground for a second marriage. Yusuf shares his frustration with his cousin Hasan, and asks for help in raising his daughter. In response, Hasan writes a letter to Yusuf suggesting a second marriage:

Dear Yusuf,
Salaam. Whatever you write is true.... I can call Sitara Jabeen here and Surayya can raise her. But I am worried about your health and your life. A home cannot be made without a woman. I wholeheartedly permit you to marry. I will not be angry with you and Surayya will continue to love you the way she has in the past. I have, however, one request to make. Make some financial arrangements for Maqbool so that she is not dependent on anyone. I would also suggest a similar arrangement for your daughter so that she is not damaged.¹⁰¹

After receiving this letter, Yusuf is happy and a search for a second wife begins. It is interesting to note that the context for a second marriage in both *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Godar ka Lal* is related to motherhood and childrearing. For both Bashiruddin Ahmad and Akbari Begum, they are legitimate rationale for a second polygamous marriage. Analysis of discourses on marriage by Saiyid Ahmad, Abdul Ghani and Bashiruddin Ahmad show that in the historical process of ‘reform’ and ‘revival’ in colonial India, reproduction and fertility do, as Mary Poovey has usefully termed it, the “ideological work” of gender, an attempt to find soothing social solutions to perplexing social problems in a comfortably defined natural realm.¹⁰² Instead of accepting the notion that a “natural difference” between the sexes delineate social roles, Mary Poovey marks the historical specificity of the concept of nature, to point out the place it occupied in the

¹⁰⁰Joan Scott, “Feminist Family Politics” in *Going Public: Feminism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Private Sphere*, ed. Joan Scott and Debra Keates (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004): 225-40.

¹⁰¹Akbari Begum, *Godar ka Lal*, p. 275.

¹⁰²Mary Poovey, “The Ideological Work of Gender” in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, Mary Poovey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1-23.

assumptions by which the Victorian middle classes governed their lives, and to describe some of the material effects that this conceptualization of sexual difference facilitated in mid-Victorian England. In *Iqbal Dulhan*, reproduction becomes the essential act of continuity for the religious group as much as the individual or the family and in *Godar ka Lal*, polygamy is presented as “solution” for an “incompatible marriage” or “bad” mothering born out of unequal educational opportunities for women.

In order to closely understand the association of motherhood with polygamy one would have to analyze historically the various constructions of motherhood by both men as well women. In the discourses on marriage by social reformers, polygamy was considered legitimate to “perpetuate one’s kind” but *Godar ka Lal* introduces a new dynamic to the history of family in the *ashraf* community of North India. The changes that occurred under colonial rule such as the introduction of modern education, a bureaucratic framework and the rise of a professional class transformed family relations at a high expense for women. The notion of an “incompatible marriage” as employed in *Godar ka Lal* clearly originates out of these social and cultural transformations. *Godar ka Lal* shows that women were also willing to accept polygamous unions. But Akbari Begum’s *Godar ka Lal* cannot be placed in the same league as Bashiruddin Ahmad’s *Iqbal Dulhan*. An examination of the status of the first wife and the role of the second wife will highlight the significant differences between Akbari Begum and Bashiruddin Ahmad on the question of polygamy.

Relationship Between the First and the Second Wife

The resolution of animosity between the first and the second wife is the prominent plot in both *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Godar ka Lal*. Contrary to *Godar ke Lal* and *Iqbal*

Dulhan, Ah-e-Mazluman seconds no notion of reconciliation or friendship between the two wives nor is there any discussion of the rights of the first wife. The second wife is depicted as base and insensitive to the sentiments of marriage.

Bashiruddin Ahmad made his case for 'legitimate polygamy' when discussing *iqrarnama* of the first marriage proposal. Later in the novel, a similar situation is created when Iqbal Mirza and Zebunissa, his wife, are unable to have children. As a result, Iqbal Mirza starts thinking about a second marriage as a "solution" to the problem of childlessness. This process is characterized by anxiety and torment for Iqbal Mirza. But gradually Iqbal Mirza starts to consider polygamy more favorably. The novel depicts both Iqbal Mirza and his wife caught up in the agony which would lead to the second marriage of Iqbal Mirza. After experiencing considerable strain, Iqbal Mirza is persuaded to a second marriage on the advice of a friend.

Not surprisingly, the second marriage is a psychological and emotional shock for Zebunissa and she is taken ill for months. As news of Zebunissa's ill health spreads in the family, her maternal grandfather visits and exhorts her to "adjust" and "reconcile" with the emergent situation. Interestingly, it is religion that provides the soother to ameliorate relations between Iqbal Mirza and Zebunissa, and most importantly a foundation for cordial settlement between Iqbal Mirza, Zebunissa and the second wife. Her grandfather is a noted maulvi (religious scholar) of the city and gives her a brief sermon on religious duty and suffering. The key term that Bashiruddin Ahmad used to refer to the sense of devotion and duty towards religion is *shane ubodiyat* meaning devotion to Allah:

O daughter, to take the misfortune to this extent over oneself is not commensurate with the requirements of 'shani ubodiyat' namely the position of a good Muslim. You cannot avert misfortune by feeling misfortune. On the contrary, it inflames it further. You know that God's love for his slaves is thousand times more than the love that the parents have for their children.....All relations of this world are just superfluous, the true love should

only be for Allah.... Remember that behind all the miseries of this world there is a reason which we cannot understand. It is the bitter medicine or even the surgery which are for your goodness and wellbeing. The doctors do not prescribe surgery because of any hostility to you. Similarly whatever afflictions we face in this world are all from Allah. We have no control over them; a misfortune is a precursor to relief. We do not like it because we do not understand the secret behind it. And therefore, we set aside the patience and forbearance required to deal with it.¹⁰³

Zebunissa's grandfather then pacifies and alleviates her pain by comparing her grief to other women in the neighborhood and the community. He says that her polygamous marriage is better than divorce or widowhood. Furthermore, he insists that her situation is better than other co-wives who live in extreme poverty. Reiterating his calls for *shane ubodiyat*, he asks her granddaughter to not express anguish over an unpleasant situation since it is against *ubodiyat* and devotion to Allah. He asks her to build forbearance and fortitude to fight her circumstances which would increase her compassion and allow her to "return to Allah with a sincere, devotional heart....one should not complain. For the happiness and grief of this world are transient."¹⁰⁴ The sermon has a profound impact on Zebunissa and she starts contemplating her situation. She realizes her folly and the dangers of holding bitterness and distrust towards Iqbal Mirza. In a letter correspondence between husband and wife, they start to reconcile and she comes to forgive him. After the grandfather's sermon, Zebunissa, Iqbal Mirza and the second wife gradually develop an amiable relationship with each other. Iqbal Mirza and his second wife have children together and Zebunissan becomes almost a second mother to them. The novel ends when the tensions have been smoothed out between all three of them to show a tranquil home where the 'problem' of childlessness has been tackled through polygamy and every character is content with their life.

¹⁰³Ibid., 225-26.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 228.

The grandfather's sermon emphasizes the religious duty of women in marriage where they are the paragons of patience and endurance. The religious duties of the virtuous wife have been explored by Avril Powell in her study of the women of the Ahmadiyya movement. Avril Powell examined the roles, ideal and real, for female members of Ahmadiyya movement, and the preparation and education for deemed appropriate by its male leaders. In her article, she discusses Ghulam Ahmad's, founder of the movement, advice to women in polygamy. Much like Bashiruddin Ahmad, Ghulam Ahmad too stressed the virtues of patience under apparent adversity, for a husband who does not deal justly with two or more wives can only be influenced for the better by the acquiescence and piety of his wives. Avril Powell also showed that the education of women was concentrated on molding them into pious daughters where they study the injunctions of Islam within the confines of their father's homes.¹⁰⁵

Unlike *Iqbal Dulhan*, in *Godar ka Lal*, religion has a lesser role in developing a friendship between first and the second wife. To a large extent, Akbari Begum supplants education for religiosity and it is the role of the educated second wife who must attend to the conflicts in the home and resolve them through her insight gained acquired in education. After consulting his cousins Hasan and Surayya, Yusuf marries Mehr Jabeen. Unlike Maqbool, Mehr Jabeen is shown to be educated and uncommonly intelligent. As we move ahead in the story, Mehr Jabeen is not simply an 'ideal' wife. In addition to remedying the estranged conjugal relationship between her husband Yusuf and Maqbool, she also assumes the responsibility of raising and educating Yusuf's daughter. The

¹⁰⁵ Avril Powell, "Duties of Ahmadi Women: Educative Processes in the Early Stages of the Ahmadiyya Movement," in *Gurus and their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in Colonial India*, ed. Anthony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000): 129-55.

character of Mehr Jabeen, the second wife in *Godar ka Lal*, is the arbiter in the relationship between her husband and his first wife, Maqbool. But *Godar ka Lal* also does not completely jettison a religious discourse in favor of a secular one. In one instance, Fahmida, a domestic help asks why she (Mehr Jabeen) worries endlessly for a co-wife, and that hostile relations between Maqbool and Yusuf is ‘good’ for her marriage. Mehr Jabeen replies that “how can I expect good to come from thinking ill of a fellow sister. And if our religion permits four *nikahs*, when necessary, then why should I consider all this as bad.”¹⁰⁶

The authority and recommendation of religion in Akbari Begum, Bashiruddin Ahmad, and more explicitly in Saiyid Ahmad, Ameer Ali and Abdul Ghani signifies that marriage and family were critical subjects in religious public discourse, and exemplify the intersection of gender and religious identity under colonialism. This also illustrates the ‘public’ private sphere characteristic of this period.

The notion of ‘friendship’ advocated in *Godar ka Lal* evinces direct comparison with *Iqbal Dulhan*. The ideal of a ‘perfect’ polygamous marriage based on friendship between the first and the second wife is depicted in both the novels. However, *Godar ka Lal* allows women space to remake their personal relationships, an aspect that is starkly absent in *Iqbal Dulhan*. The second wife in *Iqbal Dulhan* remains unknown to the reader (including her name) while Zebunissa, the first wife, for most part of her story recuperates from the aftershock of the second marriage of Iqbal Mirza. On the other hand, for Akbari Begum, women must have education and authority to control their domestic space, and conjugal rights before an ‘ideal’ home could be established.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 353.

The word ‘*haq*’ or ‘*huqooq*’ (right or rights) appears frequently in conversations between Mehr Jabeen and Yusuf Raza. The integration of ‘rights’ in marriage can be attributed to greater female agency as expressed in *Godar ka Lal* as compared to *Iqbal Dulhan*. *Iqbal Dulhan* has no reference to marital rights of either the first or the second wife. Mehr Jabeen asserts the rights of the first wife when discussing her relationship with Maqbool :

a woman, she is aware of the condition of other woman in the marriage. If you were to marry again, I would be bitter with envy and shame, and I can imagine her (Maqbool) grief. The cause of loneliness and isolation in her life is me..... Yusuf, would it be right that I take away from you everything that you have in your possession and your relationships, including your child. How can I live comfortably enjoying all the pleasures and privileges, while simultaneously, in the same house, there is another woman like me who has the same rights as I have. Indeed, as the first wife she has more rights than me. I cannot bear with the idea of living in a condition in which she becomes deprived of everything and lives a life of distress and tribulations, that there can be no solution to her predicament. No, this is not acceptable to me.¹⁰⁷

This plea of Mehr Jabeen, clearly the voice of Akbari Begum, encapsulates multiple dilemmas that confronted women reformers when they addressed the question of polygamous marriage. The rights of both the first and second wife had to be balanced in a deeply polarizing situation. For Akbari Begum, a discourse of conjugal rights of both wives was the only innovative way to challenge male supremacy over marriage, and also foster care and intimacy between the two wives.

Much like the debate on the abolition of *sati* in colonial India, ambiguity is a striking feature of the discourse on polygamy. Nevertheless, there was also unequivocal and categorical criticism of this practice and one such female voice was Nazr Sajjad Hyder (Nazr Sajjad).

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 347.

Rejection of Polygamy

Nazr Sajjad's novel *Ah-e-Mazluman* was published in 1918. The novel explored the deleterious effects of polygamy on women. Family was one of the principal concerns for Nazr Sajjad. In the preface of her novel *Akhtar- un-Nisa*, Nazr Sajjad Hyder summarized some of the major problems within the family that she wished to speak about:

The evils of an unplanned and purposeless second marriage, the illiterate second wife's unkind treatment of their step children, the educated girls' forced obedience to their illiterate step-mothers, the fathers' negligence of the needs of their children from their first wives after their second marriage, the arrangement of the marriages of their daughters in an illiterate family on their illiterate wives' advice, the women's sufferings in an illiterate milieu, the young widows' efforts to overcome their difficulties by struggling to get good education—these were the issues I raised in these serialized writings.[these writings appeared in the journal *Tahzib- un-Niswan*] ¹⁰⁸

She attributed her concern to the larger effect polygamous marriages created in the community, namely that: “hundreds, nay even thousands, of women of our community have endured these sufferings. Thousands of our helpless children who had lost their mothers were caught in troubles at the hands of these illiterate and cruel step-mothers.”¹⁰⁹

Ah-e-Mazluman contains two parallel stories each depicting a situation of polygamy. Neither story ends tragically but none of them close with friendship between the husband and the co-wives. The plot revolves around two households, one is that of Deputy Sahib, and the other is that of Munshi Hidayatullah. The novel opens with Deputy informing his wife, Sultanat Ara, about his transfer to the town of Rawalpindi from Ludhiana, the town of residence of Deputy and his wife. He specifically asks his wife to leave for Agra, where her family resides while he arranges basic living facilities at Rawalpindi.

¹⁰⁸Nazr Sajjad Hyder, *Hawa-e Chaman mein Khema-e Gul*, ed. Quratulain Hyder (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

Meanwhile, in the second household of Munshi Hidaytaullah, we are introduced to his wife Abadi Begum, his son Azmatullah, and her daughter-in-law Zubeida. Azmatullah has two sisters and one brother Shafiullah. Munshi Hidayatullah is the patriarch of the family. In this family, Zubeida is severely ill-treated by her mother-in-law Abadi Begum to the extent that she is forced to live in the small room outside the main house which is also used for storage and is a shed for animals. The stories of these two households accentuate the cruelty of husbands towards their wives and aim to intensify the exclusion and alienation experienced by the first wife.

Plot of the Novel

In the family of Munshi Hidayatullah, Abadi Begum decides to arrange a second marriage for her son to her wealthy niece Khursheed Begum. This is borne out of her malice towards Zubeida and a desire to acquire a wealthier status through the son's marriage to a rich family. On the day of Azmatullah's marriage, Zubeida is living in the room and she briefly visits the larger main house to see the new young bride.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile in the family of Deputy, Sultanat Ara moves to live with her family in Agra. After a few days, she is distressed and reveals to her sister, Tamkanat Ara, that her husband has stopped writing any letters and ceased all contact with her. Worried, she decides to leave Agra and comes to Rawalpindi with her son Fazrul Rahman and her two domestic helps, Champa and Ghulab. When she reaches Rawalpindi, she discovers that her husband has had a second marriage to a woman named Zarren Jaan.¹¹¹ Both Sultanat Ara and Zarren Jaan live together in the same house with much bitterness and angst

¹¹⁰Nazr Sajjad Hyder, *Ah-e-Mazluman*, in *Hawa-e-Chaman Mein Khema-e Gul*, ed. Qurat-ul-Ain Hyder (reprint) (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2004): 375.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 378.

amongst them. After a few days, Zarren Jaan falls ill and insists that she live separately from Deputy's wife. Deputy manages an independent living arrangement for her in an adjacent house, and divides his time between the two wives. For most part, his feelings are for Zarren jaan. While the two wives dislike each other, Sultanat Ara pretends friendship in front of everybody.

In the first household, Hidayatullah dies and the family plunges into a financial crisis. To escape penury and its stresses, Khursheed Begum and Azamtullah leave to stay at Khursheed begum's family and have a daughter together. However, within a few days of childbirth, Khursheed suffers from severe post-delivery ailments and dies. Afterwards, Azamtullah returns to his father's house. Throughout this time, he has not kept in touch with his mother or siblings. Faced by the strain of poverty and unemployment of her two sons, Abadi Begum marries off her two daughters. Meanwhile Shafiullah runs away for a better life and Azamtullah is gradually afflicted with illness and diseases. The trauma of husband's death, one son's sickness and other's escape places enormous shock on Abadi Begum, and her health too starts to wane. Zubeida returns to take care of the family when Abadi Begum and Azmatullah are bedridden. Abadi Begum realizes her mistake in marrying off Azamtullah and they reconcile with each other.¹¹²

Meanwhile, in the Deputy's house, Sultanat Ara's health also starts to decline rapidly. Concerned for her isolation and her well-being, her brother-in-law Rashid Mulk decides to arrive at Rawalpindi and escorts her back to Agra. Sultanat Ara moves back to live with her family while Deputy is married and living with Zarren Jaan. Meanwhile, there is a robbery at Deputy's house in which he is assaulted by the robbers. A financial crisis is created when Deputy is unable to work due to injuries incurred in the attack. In the

¹¹²Ibid., 393-96.

climax of the novel, Zarren Jaan colludes with Guljaan and flees the house with jewelry and money. When Sultanat Ara discovers that Deputy is in poor health and penury, she volunteers to help and they gradually return to their earlier married life.

Nazr Sajjad's position in *Ah-e-Mazluman* sets her apart from all the commentators that we have considered so far. The idea of polygamy as Islamic is not entertained at all and the happiness of the home is established only when the second wife is ousted. There is bitterness and misunderstanding between the first and the second wife instead of friendship. Polygamy is absolutely rejected, and at the end of the novel, Nazr Sajjad makes a plea on 'behalf' of first wives and women. She referred to the prevalence of polygamous marriages amongst Muslims as a "blizzard" and denounced the community for not paying enough attention for "there are numerous leaders and reformers in the community but nobody is concerned about its prevention."¹¹³ She also criticized the discourse of "adjustment" that was common to the rhetoric on polygamy:

Our truthful reality is that "oppressor hits and does not let us wail." The injunction for us is 'we oppress, you endure. We hit, you do not weep nor utter a word of censure. Just combust and crush inside but don't wince.' We obedient ill-treated ones even agree to this and our grievances and demands that is we don't even claim our rights but think that is not appropriate or respectable. When it becomes excruciating, then we endure quietly with only a flinch. In such a state, what can we do? Therefore, it is humble request of not only hundreds but thousands of heartbroken ---- to our fathers. Our true brothers! For God's sake, have mercy on us and most importantly, take notice. Then we will also call you reformers. Otherwise, what does it matter to us how many reforms you bring? Our lives are getting burned, crush and destroyed.¹¹⁴

It is important to situate historically the angry rhetoric of *Ah-e-Mazluman*. It can be considered representative of large number of active Muslim women at this time. *Ah-e-*

¹¹³Nazr Sajjad Hyder, *Ah-e-Mazluman*, in *Hawa-e-Chaman Mein Khema-e Gul*, ed. Quratulain Hyder (reprint) (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2004): 448.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 448-49.

Mazluman was published in 1918 and the All India Muslim Ladies Conference of 1918 held in Lahore issued one of the first public declarations against polygamy. An address given by Jahan Ara Shahnawaz called the custom of plural marriages one of the most shameful acts of oppression in Islam and a practice that was increasing among the best educated and most influential class of young Muslims. She also mentioned that it was contrary to the 'true' principles of Islam. The speech was met with applause by other women at the conference and one of the attendees even called for legislation to abolish polygamy much like sati. But Jahan Ara had to write a second address in the press explaining her position after she was attacked in the local papers. She was accused of insulting Islam and speaking under the influence of Christian missionaries and modern education.¹¹⁵

By 1918, the debate on polygamy had reached a focal point. A new generation of women, whom Gail Minault has called 'daughters of reform' was re-questioning polygamy and demanding a different response and a different set of answers. Nazr Sajjad Hyder was part of this generation, a generation for whom earlier writers like Rashidunnissa and Akbari Begum became the mediators between them and nineteenth century intellectuals like Saiyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali.

Summary

A close analysis of *Iqbal Dulhan*, *Godar ka Lal* and *Ah-e-Mazluman* reveals that in early twentieth century, the debate on polygamy centered on two positions: those represented by Nazr Sajjad Hyder who had come to reject completely any ambiguity on this subject and those represented by Bashiruddin Ahmad and Akbari Begum who felt

¹¹⁵Marguerite Walter, "The All India Moslem Ladies Conference," *Muslim World* 9, 2 (April 1919): 172-74.

that polygamy could still be accepted and involved a rearrangement of emotional bonds to prevent the breakdown of family. As discussed in the body of this paper, there are significant differences between Bashiruddin Ahmad and Akbari Begum that speak to how they viewed the condition of women in society. For Akbari Begum, the issue of polygamy could not be disentangled from education and rights of women. In a society where women were illiterate and her conjugal rights were contravened, polygamy would be harmful and destructive for society.

The difference between Akbari Begum, Bashiruddin Ahmad and Nazr Sajjad Hyder is important for an understanding of gender history in colonial India. It points out that gender roles as propagated in early twentieth century Urdu literature were not the same and could by no means be considered fixed, even at the prescriptive level. It is also worthwhile to note that while Bashiruddin Ahmad focused on children as a source of happiness for the family, women novelists like Akbari Begum and more strongly, Nazr Sajjad Hyder believed in companionate marriage that would bring marital contentment. The marriage of Mehr Jabeen and Yusuf Raza in *Godar ka Lal* is certainly a vision of companionate marriage but one that is marred by the presence of polygamy and female illiteracy in society. Although Nazr Sajjad Hyder does not present an ideal companionate marriage in *Ah-e-Mazluman*, she seconds it forcefully through her plea to reformers to protest against polygamous unions amongst Muslims. Further, Akbari Begum and Nazr Sajjad Hyder demonstrate that Urdu literature did not merely involve men like Nazir Ahmad or Altaf Hussain Hali seeking to reform a patriarchal social set-up; rather, the women were agitating for reform as well. Through novels, the possibility of agency became a reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three types of discourses that have emerged after analyzing for their content in religious pamphlets and novels. The first discourse on polygamy involved an unequivocal defense of the practice with no recognition of the conjugal rights of wives in marriage. This is best encapsulated in the argument of Muhammad Abdul Ghani who upheld polygamy based on biological determinism. The second discourse entailed a rejection of polygamy represented by Nazr Sajjad Hyder; one in which there is no engagement with the possibility of polygamy establishing an amicable home. Finally, the third kind of discourse based on “legitimate polygamy” was the most common and invoked both by social reformers as well as novelists. Legitimate polygamy called for specific conditions in which polygamy, despite its discriminatory nature towards women, could be accepted by society. These conditions varied for different commentators. For both Saiyid Ahmad and Bashiruddin Ahmad, polygamy was acceptable under circumstances of infertility where the couple, for some reason, is unable to have children and raise a family. This concern with procreation and continuing the family line can be seen as a marker of respectability for the *ashraf* class. For the *ashraf* community, family lineage and descent had deep personal meanings and were regarded as symbols of *sharafat* or ‘respectability.’ Polygamy can thus be seen as a process that allowed *ashraf* families to preserve their ‘respectable’ status and affirm their ancestry and family heritage. Akbari Begum believed that polygamy could resolve the dilemma of an incompatible marriage caused by discrepancy in education between the husband and the

first wife. Marriage to an educated second wife would ensure that children are well brought up and house is efficiently maintained. Here, Akbari Begum endorses the argument that the purpose of women's education was to make an "ideal" home and remake women into "good" wives, mothers and daughters.

These debates on polygamy, gleaned from religious pamphlets and novels, show the differing arguments about women's and men's roles, and the nature of femininity and masculinity. In the nineteenth century, the issue of polygamy was argued in the context of history of Islam and the tenets of Islam, in particular the life of Prophet Muhammad. Concerns of religious knowledge, identity and practice dominated the discourses and activism of religious doctrine that was hotly debated in the public sphere. The variety of interpretations of Islamic injunctions by different groups and individuals constituted the "fragmentation of sacred authority" during the colonial period. Saiyid Ahmad, Ameer Ali and Abdul Ghani represent the voices in this heterogeneous religious public sphere of Indian society.

Gender was crucial to the formation of new and divergent meanings of Islam during this period. The question of polygamy sought to understand why or if polygamy is an institution that Islam does or does not sanction. Addressing this question generated and reinforced knowledge about sexual difference based on fixed ideas of masculinity and femininity, reproduction, 'ideal' marriage and children. The "private" sphere had a public orientation and was inseparable from contestations about "true" Islam. The discursive exercise involved applying an invigorating process of reasoning and analysis to the practice of polygamy to identify its "benefits" or detrimental effects on family and society.

The evolution of the public sphere as a site for contestation and change of the private space strengthened further in the twentieth century. The 'publicness' of the private sphere or 'public' private sphere was accentuated by the coming of the print and wider dissemination of published materials. The two principal genres in this process were journals and novels. This constituted the development of an Urdu literary sphere similar to that in Hindi language. The Urdu literary sphere provided space where ideas, attitudes, beliefs and identities could be constructed and reconfigured in many ways. Amongst numerous other issues on women and family that were taken up, polygamy attracted widespread attention both by men as well as women. Bashiruddin Ahmad, Akbari Begum and Nazr Sajjad Hyder were some of the writers who expressed their opinion on polygamy in the form of the novel.

The Urdu novel was therefore crucial in raising questions about the family and about women's status in the family from different perspectives. Bashiruddin Ahmad, Akbari Begum and Nazr Sajjad Hyder all differ in their understanding of polygamy, the circumstances for its existence and finally the resolution of problem. Their novels give a glimpse of the activities of the household and the family in extensive detail with specific descriptions of family rituals, customs, social relationships and everyday life. The public Urdu literary sphere provided a discursive platform for the private Muslim space to evolve and vary in response to changing social, political and economic conditions of early twentieth century.

Another significant feature is that the Urdu novel, along with women's journals, played a crucial role in acquainting women with the world beyond the familiar and in opening up new spaces for an expression of their individual and social emotions, duties

and grievances. To study closely *Godar ka Lal* and *Ah-e-Mazluman* provides an opportunity to access their intimate world and recover two, amongst many, female voices of early twentieth century.

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