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TOPIC OF RESEARCH: **WOMEN AND URDU LITERATURE: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION, MORALITY, AND THE IDEAL MUSLIM WOMAN IN NORTH INDIA 1970s TO 1930s**

FINDINGS

This study examined the evolution of Muslim women's education in colonial India between 1870s and the early 1930s, contextualising it within the broader framework of identity construction and socio-political reform movements. Rooted in the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857, which catalysed significant shifts in governance, culture, and societal structures – this thesis explored how gender became a focal point in redefining Muslim identity amid British colonial dominance. The revolt intensified stereotypes against the Muslim community, prompting both reformist and revivalist movements to navigate the complex interplay of modernity, tradition, and identity.

The Revolt of 1857 acted as a pivotal moment in Indian history, marking the transition of governance from the East India Company to the British Crown and sparking widespread socio-political changes. For the Muslim community, this period was characterised by increased marginalisation and stereotyping as the British sought to consolidate their rule. The notion of a "Muslim Conspiracy" following the revolt further exacerbated the alienation of Muslims from political and social life, necessitating an urgent reassessment of identity and community dynamics. Reformist and revivalist movements arose in response, advocating varying degrees of engagement with modernity, Western ideas, and Islamic traditions.

This research delved into the debates surrounding Muslim women's education, propelled by reformers and revivalists who sought to uplift the community. While early reformists such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan hesitated to prioritise women's education, arguing that male literacy should take precedence, others like Sayyid Mumtaz Ali viewed women's education as integral to the community's progress. Mumtaz Ali's groundbreaking essay "Huquq-i-Niswan" challenged contemporary norms, advocating for a comprehensive education for women that extended beyond domestic skills. Similarly, revivalists engaged in these discussions, emphasising religious and moral education for women as a means to strengthen future

generations. Figures such as Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi contributed influential works like *Bahishti Zewar*, a didactic manual that underscored the necessity of basic literacy even among conservative factions.

A significant dimension of these debates was the romanticisation of "Victorian morality" and its adaptation to Indian contexts. Reformers like Nazir Ahmad, Bilgrami, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali, and Altaf Hussain Hali used literature to articulate visions of an "ideal Muslim woman" who was educated yet modest, literate yet domestically oriented. This ideal became a recurring theme in the didactic literature and manuals aimed at women, which proliferated with the advent of print culture. Journals like *Tahzib un-Niswan* and *Ismat* emerged as platforms for discussing women's roles, often critiquing redundant customs ("*fizool rasmein*") and promoting values like *tahzib* and *akhlaq*. These writings reflected a blend of traditional Islamic principles, and contemporary influences, shaping the discourse on women's education and morality.

This study emphasizes the critical yet underrepresented role of women writers in these reformist discourses. While male reformers predominantly shaped the public narrative, women like Muhammadi Begum, Sughra Humayun Mirza, and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, expressed their agency through literature, challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for educational and social reforms. These women's writings, often published in journals or as fictional works, not only critiqued male-dominated perspectives but also envisioned a progressive role for women in society. Muhammadi Begum's *Tahzib un-Niswan* and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's works exemplify the proactive role women took in shaping the discourse around education and gender roles, providing a counter-narrative to male-dominated reformist literature.

The methodology has employed a feminist lens to analyse primary and secondary sources, including Urdu novels, articles, and didactic manuals produced between 1870 and the 1930s. This approach analysed the spectrum of arguments regarding women's education – ranging from conservative to progressive – and highlighted the agency of women writers in influencing societal change. The research underscored the complexities of these debates, where traditionalists and progressives often intersected in their goals but diverged in their methods and ideologies. By examining a wide array of literary and historical sources, the study attempted to reconstruct nuanced narratives of Muslim women and their role in educational reform.

Central to this study is the exploration of how educational reforms for women were framed within the broader objective of community building. For most reformers, educating women was not an end in itself, but a means to create better mothers and wives who would, in turn, raise an enlightened generation. This utilitarian approach was evident in the curricula proposed for women, which often prioritised religious instruction, moral development, and domestic skills. However, figures like the Aga Khan III championed women's education as a pathway to personal and economic independence, marking a divergence from the dominant narrative. Aga Khan's progressive stance highlighted the potential of women's education to transcend traditional roles and contribute to individual empowerment and societal progress.

The emergence of print culture played a transformative role in shaping these debates. The proliferation of Urdu journals, novels, and instructional manuals created a public sphere where ideas about women's education and roles could be contested and redefined. Early works like Nazir Ahmad's *Mirat ul-Urus* and Hali's *Majalis un-Nissa* laid the foundation for this discourse, using fiction to advocate for literacy and moral reform among women. These narratives often portrayed idealised female characters who embodied the virtues of education, modesty, and piety, serving as role models for the intended audience.

Women writers, however, brought a distinct feminine perspective to this literary landscape. Their works often addressed the contradictions and limitations of male reformist ideals, emphasising the need for genuine agency and autonomy. For instance, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* envisioned a feminist utopia where women's intellectual and creative potential was fully realized. Similarly, Muhammadi Begum's *Khanadari* gave practical advice, highlighting the importance of education in enabling women to navigate and challenge societal expectations.

The study also examined the role of women's magazines like *Tahzib un-Niswan*, *Ismat*, and *Khatun*, which served as platforms for women's voices and facilitated the exchange of ideas among female readers. These publications often featured articles, stories, and editorials that advocated for educational reform, critiqued oppressive customs, and celebrated the achievements of women. They also provided a space for women to articulate their aspirations and concerns, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective identity.

Another critical aspect of this research is the intersection of gender, class, and identity in the discourse on women's education. The reformist and revivalist movements were often led by male elites who sought to define an "ideal Muslim woman" that reflected their own class and

cultural biases. This ideal often excluded marginalised women, whose experiences and perspectives were rarely represented in mainstream narratives. By contrast, women writers and activists sought to broaden the scope of these debates, advocating for inclusivity and addressing the specific challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds.

The research highlights the paradoxes and complexities inherent in the movement for women's education. While reformers and revivalists sought to empower women through education, their efforts were often constrained by patriarchal norms and expectations. Male reformers, for instance, frequently positioned women as passive recipients of reform rather than active participants. Women writers, however, challenged this dynamic by asserting their agency and redefining the terms of the debate. Their contributions underscore the importance of recognising women as agents of change rather than mere subjects of reform.

The study concludes that the movement for Muslim women's education in colonial India was a multifaceted and contested process, shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and political factors. While male reformers played a prominent role in articulating the need for education, the voices of women writers and activists were instrumental in challenging and expanding these narratives. By foregrounding the contributions of women, this research provided a more nuanced understanding of the historical dynamics of gender and education, highlighting the transformative potential of women's agency in shaping the future of their communities.

In tracing the evolution of these debates, the study also underscored the enduring relevance of the issues addressed by reformers and writers of the period. The questions of access, agency, and representation that characterised the discourse on women's education in colonial India continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about gender and education.