

column : *Parisien Portrait*

Nostalgia Improves with the Passage of Time

by Raana Haider

...like good cheese, a comfortable armchair, a comfortable pair of shoes or a well-thumbed book. Returning to live in Paris after an interval of some forty years is an exhilarating experience *par excellence*, allowing one to partake in the sentiment of nostalgia in heavy dosages. I had a childhood residence of a few years in the mid-1950s in Paris when I accompanied my late father, Mirza Rashid Ahmad, a career diplomat then posted in Paris.

The odd forty years in a time-frame has spanned Paris of the 1950s — a decade or so following the end of World War 2 to the close of the 1990s and the start of a new millennium. This sweep of time has seen the rise and fall of nations and the reverse. It has seen the integration and disintegration of communities and its reverse.

Yet nowhere is the French aphorism, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose," (the more it changes, the more it is the same), truer than in Paris itself. As stated by Herve Champollion, noted French photographer in the introduction to his book, *Paris*, "for in spite of all the clichés, Paris is perennially itself, perennially unique unlike any other city in the world." For it is in Paris, the 'city of lights' that one finds the rare and unique combination of extremes — reassuring tradition combined with revolutionary change. This visible

coexisting paradox of classicism and modernity is closely interlocked and fluid in its flow from one to the other. France's twin serious preoccupations — history and culture — ensure that Paris's unique blend of classical tradition and modernism creates an aura in the city's architectural homogeneity and an inviting ambience in its street life. This *charmante* combination has often earned Paris the title — the most beautiful city in the world.

Often asked whether Paris has changed in the last forty years, I reply, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." Certainly, Paris carries about it the same elegant tree-lined boulevards, vast expanses of vista, majestic buildings, flourishing fountains, spectacular monuments, colourful neighbourhoods, chic shops, corner cafes, well-stocked newspaper kiosks and a high density of dogs as I recall from previous years.

This is probably far more due to design rather than as a result of default. Why speak of change in the past forty years? Paris has, from a physical perspective, not changed much in the past 150 years. Today's central Paris with its wide tree-lined boulevards, elegant buildings and grandiose monuments is largely the creation of Baron Haussmann during the second half of the 19th century under the direction of Napoleon the Third. The Emperor wanted a city

design which in addition to aesthetic attributes would have a practical consideration — wide boulevards would allow for rapid troop deployment.

The Parisien aesthetic sense of continuity is, however, not by any means fossilized or fatigued. For frequently behind the classical facade of the exterior of a building lies a high-tech, state-of-the-art interior with plastic, chrome, steel, geometric designs, luminescent colours and extreme modern lines; as in many of the arcades and shops along the Champs Elysees, the *premier* avenue of Paris. The Disney shop, Planet Hollywood restaurant, Virgin Records and Sephora, the perfume and cosmetic consumer's dreamland, all on the Champs Elysee are particular examples of the unique blend of the *ancien* and *nouveau* (the old and the new).

It takes a certain *savoir-faire* (a certain know-how) to create an art museum out of a railway station. This has been achieved in the Musée d'Orsay which features paintings, sculptures and decorative arts from the period 1850 to 1914. A grandiose structure housed the railway station, Gare d'Orsay from 1898 to 1939 when it was abandoned. In a similar fashion, Les Halles, one of the oldest districts of Paris which has been described by Emile Zola as "the belly of Paris" was until 1969 the city's wholesale food

market. Ten years later, the site became Forum des Halles, an urban complex of consumer culture — restaurants, movie halls, shops, banks — all in glass and aluminum.

The ultimate coexistence of the *ancien* and the *nouveau* is the startling presence of a grand glass pyramid and two smaller ones in the massive courtyard of the Louvre Museum. They were designed by I M Pei, the eminent contemporary Chinese-American architect in the mid-1980s. The near juxtaposition of an ultra-modern glass and chrome structure among the classical columns, friezes and sculptures of 18th and 19th centuries architecture is at once visually jarring and jolting. The pros and cons of this inclusion are heatedly argued upon by one and all. Upon contemplation, which is new and which is old? The pyramid architecture predates the main buildings of the Louvre by some 3000 years! "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?"

For any Anglophile in the Mother of all Francophone countries, a visit to the Paris branch of W H Smith is a must. It has been described as "an institution of English travellers in Paris since 1903." It is situated on the Rue de Rivoli, one of the masterpieces in urban design of the official architects of Napoleon I, Fontaine and Percier. These two individuals are the creators of much of the

Empire-style of the architectural glory visible today in Paris.

In my possession, I have two books bought at W H Smith in 1958, with the stickers still on one of them, priced 8sh. 6d net. One of the books is *Little Women* by Louisa M Alcott, any girl's classic novel and the now appropriately titled *When We Were Very Young* by A A Milne. A A Milne's other creation is *Winnie the Pooh* which serves the current generation of young consumers in Pooh paraphernalia (T-shirts, mugs, pencil-cases, school bags, stuffed toys etc.) at the Disney shop on the Champs Elysee. *Little Women* was also remade into a movie in the 1990s, the earlier version being of the 1930s or 1940s.

In those days, a child's treat consisted of a book or two from W H Smith and tea and cakes in the Salon de The on the first floor of the same shop. The Salon de The no longer exists. It was stopped in 1989. Bestsellers and children's books are now to be found in the old rooms. A child of today, my daughter can still get a book or two at W H Smith (recent purchases included Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* and *Murder on the Orient Express*) and then enjoy an icecream at a current global culture favourite, Hagen Daaz. W H Smith has faithfully served three generations of book lovers.

For any sub-continental in the

Mother of all Francophone countries a visit to Saris is a must. There may very well be three generations of readers of this article who are proud possessors of good investments — the French chiffon sari. Started soon after the end of World War II, it was located in an exclusive area close to the Madeline, a classical Greek-styled church and walking distance from Place de la Concorde, probably the finest and largest square in the world. Many a time I had accompanied my mother on shopping trips to Saris France as it was then known. Four years ago, it moved to the current location near the Paris Bourse (Stock Exchange) and the office of Agence France-Presse (AFP). The 85 year old director, Monsieur Ramjis Alain still makes an early morning call at the shop.

The allure of French chiffon saris has not diminished and neither has its cost. Prices range from \$ 150-\$ 600 per sari. It calls for further cherishing any French chiffon saris one may have been lucky enough to inherit from one's mother. I plan to introduce my daughter to Saris — she too, one day may become a third generation customer of an item which personifies, 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever.'

The French phrase 'Je ne sais quoi' (I don't know what), truly translates into that unidentifiable and elusive 'something' which one either has or doesn't have. Paris has it. And plenty of it. ■

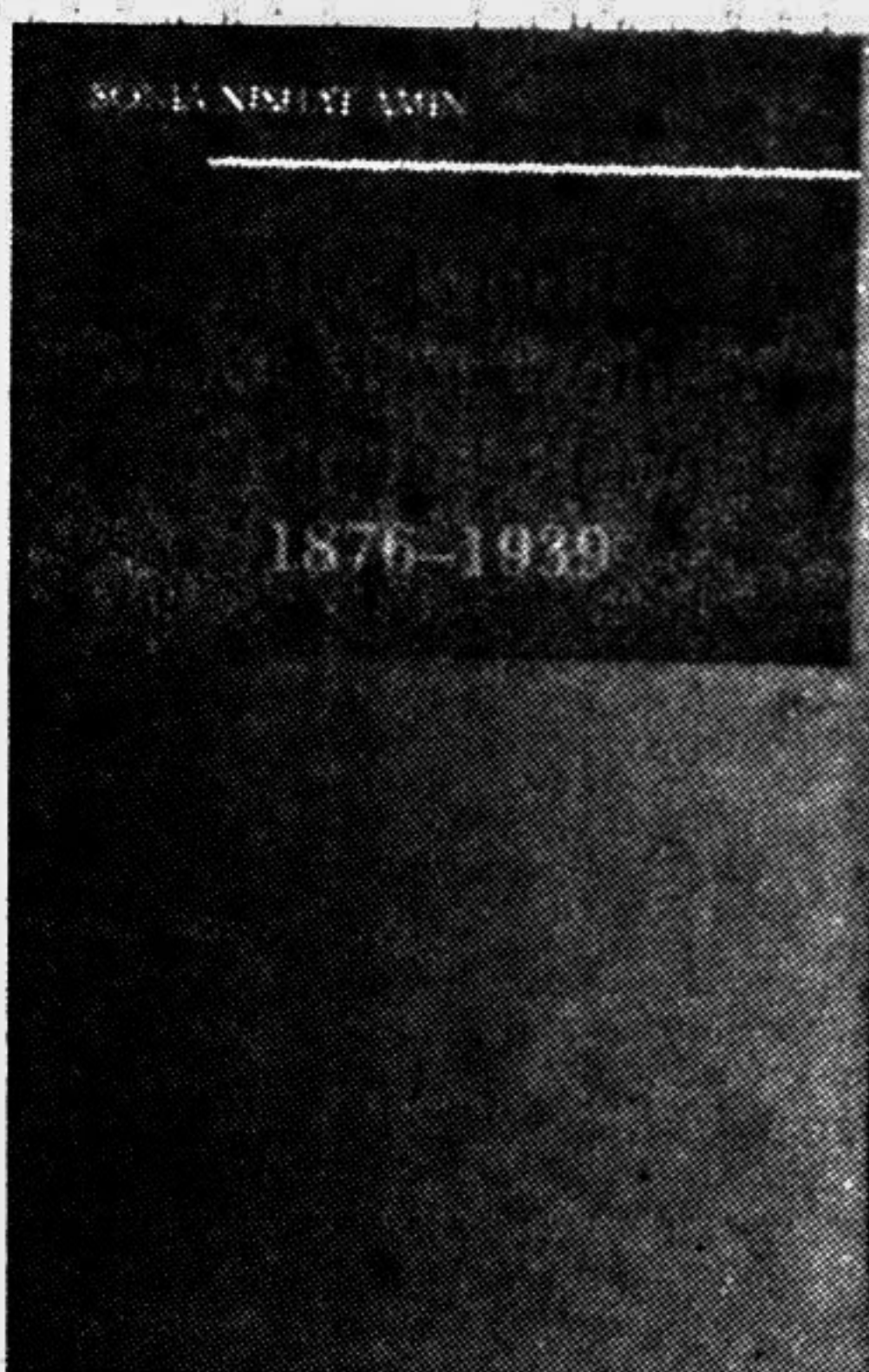
book review

Tracking the Muslim Bhadramahila's Passage from the Home to the World

by Fakrul Alam

SONIA NISHAT AMIN'S *THE World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* is somewhat misleadingly titled: the book is not about the universe that the ordinary Muslim woman inhabited in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Bengal. Certainly, we do not read in the pages of Amin's work about the everyday lives of the vast majority of Muslim women in colonial Bengal. Amin thus has very little to say about women from non-sharif families who lived and died anonymously during the period. Only one paragraph of the book records an awareness of working class women as Amin devotes a sentence to women "employed in jute mills at this time" and two others to women active in "the anti-colonial struggle," despite evidence in contemporary records of lower class women in the workplace or women in political movements.

What Sonia Nishat Amin concentrates on instead is the passage of women from mostly Bengali Muslim *sharif* families in the first half of the twentieth century from the confines of their homes to the world outside. Confidently, and in abundant detail, Amin reconstructs the paths taken by upper middle and upper class Muslim women of the province of Bengal to emerge from the hermetic world of the *zenana* to the open spaces of public life. In other words, Amin is interested in the "birth" of the Muslim *bhadramahila*, the "making" of the new Muslim "gentlewoman," and the ideological drama that accompanied the birth and the making. Analyzing autobiographies, memoirs, and biographies of the famous men and women of the period, gleaming little known details from contemporary newspapers and periodicals, and extracting information from unpublished private papers and long out of print conduct manuals and tracts as well as the burgeoning scholarship on women's lives in our time, Amin reconstructs the phases through which Bengali Muslim women passed in the last hundred years or so before entering the public domain. On occasions, Amin draws her conclusions from interviews she has herself conducted with the few women who are



Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. 313 pp. Leiden, The Netherlands: E J Brill, 1996.

still with us from the last phase of what she calls "the emergence of the [Muslim] *bhadramahila* through the process of women's awakening," although I must say that I do not think she has made enough of the forty or so interviews she conducted with them or with relatives of other Muslim women who did not survive the phase. Amin also bases her narrative on archival sources, but as she herself acknowledges in her Preface, she has not made extensive use of them because of her belief that they are of "subsidiary importance" to the kind of "cultural history" that she is writing.

Sonia Nishat Amin begins her story of the Muslim *bhadramahila* in 1876 because that was the year Nawab Faizunnesa Chaudhurani published *Rupjalal*, the first full length book by a Muslim woman in Bengal. That Amin chooses this date, and not 1876, when the irrepressible Nawab founded a school for the girls of Comilla is significant; Amin is especially attracted to

the creative ferment in the consciousness of Bengali Muslim women that has been increasingly evident throughout this century. Although *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* has the objectivity we can expect in a work of social and cultural history, Amin's enthusiasm for her subject and for the Bengali Muslim women who have been in the vanguard in the movement for their emancipation is everywhere evident. Amin's book, therefore, is also a paean to the precursors of the women who are now playing an indispensable role in our public as well as private lives: famous women like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein who is undoubtedly the protagonist of Amin's story, but also almost forgotten women such as Mamlukul Fatema who founded a school in Dhaka on her own in the early years of the century, wrote fiction, and participated actively in the cultural life of the city.

The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939 ends with the founding of Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta in 1939 as an institution "founded mainly — but not exclusively — for Muslim girls," since Amin sees this event as a manifestation of the will to make "institutional education" for Muslim women "a firm reality." Amin depicts the changes in the Muslim family that took place from 1876-1939, changes which resulted from reform movements in colonial Bengal, from the economic transformations that led the joint family to split in some cases, and from the rise of formal education in the region. The last two chapters of Amin's study, "Growth of Creativity among Muslim Bhadramahila" and "The New Women in Literature" reveal abundantly her belief that it was in the fields of fiction and non-fictional prose that we have the most vivid records of the immense mental distances traversed by a few intrepid women in less than fifty years.

Sonia Nishat Amin persuasively places the emergence of the Muslim *bhadramahila* within the larger context of the Bengal renaissance. She traces diligently the impact of the new learning on nineteenth century Bengali society and the effect of the Brahmo ap-

proach to women's education on Bengali society as a whole. She sees reform measures undertaken towards the end of that century breaking down family structures in the first few decades of the next one. Perhaps a little hyperbolically, she declares that "education was the great battle ground [sic] for reformers in the early part of the present century." Amin's narrative of governmental intervention as well as private initiatives taken by pioneering women such as Nawab Faizunnesa and Rokeya is an absorbing and thoughtful one; in her interpretation, centrist and liberal approaches to the question of women's education ultimately triumphed and made a major difference in the lives of Muslim women. Although she qualifies her optimism somewhat towards the end of her book by seeing Bengali Muslim women at the end of her period of study to have moved away from "private patriarchy" only as far as "public patriarchy," this is, on the whole, a positive-minded interpretation of one aspect of the modernization of the Bengali consciousness.

A look at Sonia Nishat Amin's extensive bibliography makes it clear that *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* is going to fill a lacuna in our history: till her book came out, we had some distinguished and detailed studies of the making of the (Hindu) Bengali *bhadramahila*, and some indispensable scholarly publications on the awakening of Bengali Muslims in the last century, but almost nothing on the rise of the Bengali Muslim *bhadramahila*. There is little reason to doubt, then, that Amin's comprehensive and competent study will be of great use for anyone interested in our history, in women's studies, and in cultural studies. There is much in it that is new and a lot that makes for fascinating reading.

I wish I could end this review of Sonia Nishat Amin's *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* on a completely positive note, but I must express my reservations about some aspects of the work. For although the book bears the prestigious imprint of E J Brill's and is a volume in its important "Social, Economic and Political Studies

of the Middle East and Asia" series, and although it was printed in the Netherlands, and presumably edited and refereed by more than one of the distinguished scholars listed in the title page, and although it comes to us in a very attractive cover, the work has been insufficiently edited, and somewhat carelessly produced. My review copy, for instance, comes with a Corrigendum that lists ten misprints in the text; I would say that the real number of press errors will be at least ten times more. Every once in a while we come across a word or a phrase lost in the printing process which makes reading difficult. Throughout the text, spelling, especially hyphenation, punctuation, capitalization, and italicization are problem areas and indicate negligent proof-reading. An alert editor would have noticed that the middle part of Syeda Monowara Begum's name appears also as "Monwara" and "Manowara" in successive pages (pp 45-46). Careful editing would have reduced the many instances of repetition of words, phrases, and even sentences in the text. For instance, the words *ashraf* and *atraf* are defined almost identically on p 2 and p 17, two sentences about Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun which appear on p. 229 are repeated verbatim on p 262, and the undoubtedly interesting penultimate paragraph of the book is only a slightly differently worded version of a paragraph in p 132. A line editor going through the book carefully would have found many of the phrases used in it as quaint or pompous: to cite a few examples, we hear of a "Bengali Mahomedan" on p. 170; on p 172 we are informed about Muslim girls who did not "come forth" for the Entrance examinations; on p 173 we are told about someone who "hailed" from Persia. This is the kind of book where women pass their examination "with flying colours" or have "broken the shackles and were visible in all walks of life" and have "kith and kin" and are being warned by their "brethren".

Occasionally, it has seemed to me that Amin could have been more temperate in her judgements. Was it really necessary to generalize so sweepingly on p. 29 that "a denigrating onslaught

on the culture and history of the colonized was a strategy of the colonizing powers in other regions of the world as well as India?" Where would this leave the likes of Edmund Burke who never stopped believing in Britain's right to colonize India, but who wrote, famously, in his great speech on the East India Bill that Indians were 'a people for ages civilized and cultivated; cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods'? Surely, Amin is being carried away by her enthusiasm for her favorite Muslim *bhadramahila* when she has Rokeya Sakhawat expounding "a clear feminist theory in the 1940s"?

I also think that Amin is a little uncritical in her use of words such as "discourse". On p 65, to take one example, she tells us that "the Islamic discourse on sexuality had been formulated over centuries in several classical texts" but if there is one thing that Michel Foucault has taught us, it is that discourse is totally anonymous and never shaped by individual writers.

In general, I think Amin could have spent less time on sketching the Bengal and Muslim renaissance contexts of the rise of the Bengali Muslim *bhadramahila* and could have devoted more time to appraising the lives and works of the many women mentioned in her study. Thus in the chapter on "The New Woman in Literature" it is good to have some discussion on "the north Indian discourse," but should Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Behesti Zewar* have a page given to it, when Nurunnessa's *Atmadan*, mentioned in the same section, gets only a sentence? Sometimes Amin appears to be more intent on offering us a potted one-paragraph biography of someone such as Mrs M Rahman (p 227) than in evaluating her contribution to our history.

I would not have the author of *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* take me amiss though: Sonia Nishat Amin has written an important book and one that deserves to be carefully read by anyone interested in our past. Would that she and her publishers had taken as much trouble with the production of the book as she did in researching it! ■

impressions

The Beauty of Sounds of Silence

by Shuvashish Priya Barua

SILENCE could be said to be the ultimate province of trust. It is the place where we trust ourselves to be alone; where we trust others to understand the things we do not say; where we trust a higher harmony to assert itself. "Silence is the only voice of God,"

wrote Herman Melville. However, we have to earn silence to make it not an absence (i.e. emptiness) but a presence. Silence is more than just a pause. It is that enchanted place where space is cleared and time is frozen and the horizon itself expands. In silence, we often say, we can hear ourselves think as we

can sink below ourselves into a far deeper place.

We all know how often we use words to cover our embarrassment or emptiness, or fear of the larger space that silence brings. Words are often what we use for lies, false promises, and gossip. We babble with strangers; with the inti-

mate ones we can be silent.

Thomas Merton wrote: "A man who loves God, necessarily loves silence." It is no coincidence that places of worship are places of silence. We might almost say that silence is the tribute we pay to holiness. We slip off words when we enter a sacred place, just as we slip off

shoes. A "moment of silence" is the highest honour we can pay someone. A "vow of silence" is the highest devotional act for holy men. There is, of course, a place for noise as there is for daily lives.

But the greatest charm of noise is when it ceases. Because this not only opens up the door for silence

but also makes us appreciate the absence of silence.

Therefore, we may say that silence is the place where we find our God, however we may express it; silence is the state that goes beyond the doctrines and divisions created by the human minds.