

BOOK REVIEW

Muslim women in the crucible of feminist theory

A review of Elora Shehabuddin’s *Sisters in the Mirror*

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

Writer and academic Elora Shehabuddin has lived in a number of countries and had a fair share of exposure to multicultural environments. Her lived experience must have proved helpful in bringing in a comprehensive perspective to the discussion in *Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism* (University of California Press 2021; University Press Limited 2022).

The “Muslim women” in the book’s subtitle are mainly from South Asia. Shehabuddin’s West versus South Asia perspective is warranted, as the latter contains one of the largest segments of the global Muslim population. Generally, the experiences and perspectives of Arab Muslims are prominent in Western discussions of Islam and Muslims even though only 20 per cent of the world’s Muslims are Arab. Shehabuddin adds significant dimensions to such debates by including South Asian Muslim voices in comparative feminist scholarship.

By focusing on Muslims in Bengal, *Sisters in the Mirror* counters the tendency to conflate Muslims with Arabs, Bengal with Hinduism, and South Asian Muslims with Urdu-speakers. A recent example of such homogenization and exclusion is Jayati Gupta’s *Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women, 1870-1940* (2020). Ostensibly about Bengali women, it discusses solely those from a Hindu background. Conversely, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Daniel Majchrowicz and Sunil Sharma include two Bengali Muslim women, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and Shaista Ikramullah (1915-2000), in *Three Centuries of Travel Writing by Muslim Women* (2022). They regard Rokeya’s “Kupmunduker Himalaya Dorshon” as a piece of travel writing where she says, “Many don’t understand that, maintaining purdah approved by the (Muslim religious) scripture, (women) can travel abroad.”

Shehabuddin discusses the westward journeys of Muslim men and women from Bengal over several centuries, interlacing these accounts with those of English (and later, American) travellers to Bengal. With all these travellers, her interest lies in how encounters with the Other “led writers to pause and

that sense, represent the final frontier of twenty-first-century Western feminist humanitarian activism” (2). The simplistic and reductionist misrepresentation of Muslim societies is used as “a stick with which to beat Islam,” to quote the American feminist writer Meredith Tax who helped publicize the Taslima Nasrin story in 1994 (254).

There have been feminist foremothers and/or influential women in all or most societies. As the West has Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) and Mary Astell (1666-1731), it is hardly

According to Shehabuddin, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher John Millar (1735–1801) regarded women’s sexual modesty as a mark of civilizational advancement. Even during the Cold War period, the US regarded its women’s “adherence to traditional domestic roles” as a mark of superiority to “to the ill-dressed peasant women and female factory workers of the Soviet Union” (266). Robert Young pinpoints a drastic self-contradiction in the Western claim of being the standard bearer. In *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003), he states: “In the 19th century, the west considered the wearing of clothes as the mark of civilization; it was ‘savages’ who went naked. In the 20th and 21st centuries, however, semi-nudity became the signifier of western superiority.”

As we are considering



possible to ignore the existence of Muslim women such as Fatima al-Fihri (800–80) who founded al-Qarawiyyin University in Tunisia in 859. What Shehabuddin shows is how such stories of feminism have always been entangled and, importantly, shaped by global disparities “in economic, political, and military power” (9).

here the first edition of *Sisters in the Mirror*, it is inevitable that a book of its length and immense geographic and temporal scope should have a couple of shortcomings. They by no means diminish its strengths but may be noted for the sake of this review. As part of her effort to raise counter voices to the dominance of Western feminists, Shehabuddin seeks to let lesser-known Muslim women writers shine and speak for themselves. She adopts the method of using many quotations, some of which in my opinion could be paraphrased for a better readability of this most valuable book.

Second, Shehabuddin’s statement that for Rokeya “all religions, including Islam, were inherently problematic for women” leaves room for disagreement. Rokeya’s fight for gender justice was very much within the framework of Islam. In places where she appears to be critical of religious authorities, her actual targets are pseudo-religious people and texts.

For example, in “God gives, man robs,” Rokeya states that “Islam allows every freedom to women.” In *Motichur-I*, she eloquently notes:

In Arab society, where women were being oppressed and female infanticide was widespread, Prophet Muhammad came to their rescue.... Alas! It is because of his absence among us that we [women] are in such a despicable plight!

In her presidential speech at the Bengal Women’s Education Conference, Rokeya says: “The person who spoke for equal education for men and women is our Prophet.” In “Rani Bhikharini,” she adds: “In this vast world no country, nation or religion recognized the soul of woman let alone give her rights. It is only Islam that has given woman her legitimate rights.”

It is true that Rokeya regarded “religious texts” as “nothing but rules and regulations created by men” (142). Given her overall views, it is unlikely that here she deprecates Islam’s primary texts. This is actually “an expression of her strong disapproval of pseudo-sacred, misogynist texts” written by people in religious garb. Rokeya’s true attitude to the Qur’an is reflected among other places in “Kupmunduker Himalaya Dorshon” where she says: “However, if we follow the scripture, we don’t have to face more difficulty.”

I read *Sisters in the Mirror* from cover to cover and highly recommend it to readers. This foundational text marks a significant contribution to feminist debates and Muslim women’s writing and is an incredible resource for students and researchers working in the field of global/transnational feminism and South Asian Muslim women. It provides a compact history of contemporary women’s rights movements in the West and beyond.

A look at the acknowledgements and works cited sections of the book confirms the wide range of people and sources that Shehabuddin consulted to produce it. Its engaging nature gripped me from start to finish so much that I put aside other reading activities while perusing it. Given its content and style, it is not an exaggeration to say that *Sisters in the Mirror* is one of the most informative and insightful books I have read on gender issues and feminist politics from a global perspective.

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POETRY



The Journey

SHAGUFTA SHARMEEN TANIA

She remembers the window,
A bright envelope opened and gleamed
In the dark railway carriage.
Its rectangular frame cut back every irrelevant,
Decapitated all remainders.
Outside an intemperate sky painted everything blue
And looked her on the nose.

They were returning from the wedding banquet,
A feast of the second day.
She was returning home,
A hunted animal carried back on a pole,
A homecoming unlike all her others.

The groom slept on her shoulder
Like a willing disciple of Christ in a Baroque painting,
A gaping mouth, a sweaty forehead,
Half-faint with an obscure consciousness.
They tried to make love the night before, in vain,
“Maybe you are sealed, he exclaimed,
Some women are, you know!”
“But I leak every month, how can I be so!”
She thought of her night as the ruffled clouds
Whirled past her, wandering Sufi Dervishes.
As the reflecting lakes gave up
Running alongside her window, diminishing
Themselves towards a vanishing point.

The groom’s sleepy hand clasped
Her casket of jewellery,
A loose clutch of consciousness.
The rest in the compartment had gone to sleep,
After two clamouring banqueting merry-making nights.
A film of dust had settled on them,
A cluster of statues newly chiselled.

On the empty sky beyond,
Electric wires pencilled some fleeting lines
Like the faltering hopes of her mind,
Looking for some certitude.
They too left her side soon.

She stared alone from the dark,
Or so she thought.
Her father kept awake,
A few seats after her,
Dazed with the heat, pale with worries,
Yet awake.

Shagufta Sharmeen Tania’s work has appeared in *Wasqfiri*, *Asia Literary Review*, *City Press* and *Speaking Volumes Anthology*. This year, her short story, “What Men Live By” has been short-listed for Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2022.

Rendezvous with the Devil

HASAN MARUF

Carving mysterious runes with bones
A pentagram etched in my soul
Pulling on the blistered sinews
Of Desperately unrestrained sins
With the malady of pestilent mists
And lace of midnight moonbeams
In the suffocation of crimson depths
The reflections of waning and pale,
I am cloudy and defiled as I drown.



Wormwood wind with a funeral hymn
Lulls me to the sublime dead
To join in the pool of blood-red
Near is littered with Vanda’s last breath,
Lilac orchid joyless and empty
Grieving a liturgy of intense woe!

On this autumn and nondescript night,
This dark guest that dawned on me
And drenched with his stygian nectar,
He chuckled the seal of Solomon inside me
My body shuddered in a saintly ravishment
As the elixir of my essence gushes out.

And perfervid predacious embraces entwined,
Like grave’s evil conjuration,
To sweeten the horror of seclusion.
The Devil devouring my body and soul
Once taken there is no escape from eternal perdition
I crave you, I long for you, and I mourn on my Tirtha
The purgatorial and the bewitching death!

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Foregrounding the significance of Bengal in European ocean trade and voyages, Shehabuddin touches on such stories as that of Catarina de San Juan (1605–88), believed to have been a Bengali Muslim princess. She was kidnapped, baptized and enslaved by the Portuguese and died a devout woman.

reconsider norms in their own society” (5).

Sisters in the Mirror examines, for instance, the 1766 voyage of Mirza Shaikh Ihtishamuddin (1730-1800) to the West. Full of inquisitiveness and fascination for the host country and its people, he was puzzled to find himself an object of curiosity and fetishized attention among the British. He went there to “enjoy a spectacle” but ended up being one himself.

Ihtishamuddin’s experience reminds me of the travels to Europe of two Muslim women in the early 20th century, Atiya Fyzee (1877-1967) from British India and Zeyneb Hanoum (1883-1923) from Turkey. Both women were similarly shocked to have stimulated a heightened level of curiosity among Europeans. Fyzee describes how two English women were “amazed by the artistry and suitability of [her] clothes” and adds, “If they meet an Indian who does not meet their fixed views, they become totally flabbergasted.” Hanoum regards the nosiness she and her sister Melek received from the British as “an unpleasant discovery” and deplores, “One of the reasons for which we left Turkey was ... the degrading supervision of the Sultan’s spies. But is it not almost the same here?” Decades later, in the 1950s, as Shehabuddin shows, Shamsunnahar Mahmud elicited a comparable level of curiosity in the US where she was featured as a “traveler from a land where women’s freedom is new” (178).

As in Orientalist discourse the entire East is reduced to the Muslim world, in certain Western feminist theories the colonial pretext of saving brown women from brown men has narrowed down its focus to Muslim women who unlike Western women are “supposedly deprived of all the rights and liberties” (2). Shehabuddin maintains: “Muslim women, in

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Like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o who decries “state intellectuals” in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Shehabuddin highlights the unholy connection between organizations such as the Feminist Majority Foundation and US government policies. There are government-leaning feminists in both Western and non-Western countries. The complex interactions between establishment feminists and government institutions explain the former’s clamorous vociferations on certain gender-related issues and their deafening silence on other equally or more important ones.

While reading *Sisters in the Mirror*, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea’s works came to mind again and again. Shehabuddin points out, for example, that Muslim women long enjoyed many basic legal rights under Islam and that Jewish and Christian women in Iberia actually took their cases to Muslim courts hoping for better outcomes. In “Islamic Feminism Finds a Different Voice” (2000), Fernea argues that Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico were the first US states to give women inheritance rights. This comparative forwardness she attributes to their past as Spanish colonies, influenced by the legacy of Muslim rule in Spain.