Chapter 2
Are Indian Muslim Women Denied by Allah?:
Noor Zaheer’s
*My God is a Woman*

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise
I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise.
I rise.
I rise.

- Maya Angelou (1928 - 2014)
Introduction

Pluralism, syncretism and ethnic diversity compose and represent India as a unique land on the world map. India “has no established religion and this is the first sign of its commitment to treat all communities as equal” (Mahajan 113). Indian civilization has welcomed various cultures with their ethnographical, linguistic, social, and ritualistic influences. The country is for a multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious population with colonial influences. “The pan-Indian, civilizational dimension of cultural pluralism and syncretism encompasses ethnic diversity and admixture, linguistic heterogeneity as well as fusion... The sharing of space, regional ethos and cultural traits cut across religious and sectarian differences and bind the local people together” (Das 2). Asghar Ali Engineer (2004) argues that “Islam entered into India almost in the lifetime of Muhammad the Prophet of Islam... through the Arab traders in a peaceful manner” (71) in Kerala and not during 7th century A.D. by an invasion through Muhammad bin Qasim. Islam as a belief system was warmly welcomed and followed by many local people. Marriages between the Arab traders and Kerala women played a significant role in spreading the religion. Hence, Muslims are an integrated part of India from the beginning of Islam. Different Muslim rulers, British rulers and Indian political leaders – all together in a complex way, have influenced lives of Muslim women in a distinct way. The history of each state enigmatically influences their day to day lives. After independence in 1947, “partition, justified or not, became the cause of animosity between the two communities in India... Partition, far from solving the communal problem in India, further aggravated it” (Engineer 73).

Later on, an identity crisis for Muslims in India can be seen as an existential inquiry in general and for women in particular. Contemporary Muslim women with a tormented history of partition and with religious suppression represent a very blurred picture of progress and self-esteem growth. Identity, equity and security are thus the major fundamental problematic concerns for the Indian Muslims to deal with in their day to day lives. The concept of alienation and ghettoisation seems to get emerged among the Muslims to acquire an identity, equity and security which can be fully satisfied within a circle of Muslims. Indian Muslims are torn between Indian and Islamic cultural identity crisis while women, on the other hand, face triple marginalization as being ‘second sex’, facing the continuous dilemma of identity...
through their ‘culture’, ‘religion’ and finally their ‘gender’. Their existence does not, thus, represent any single parameter.

**Muslim Women in India**

Shahida Lateef (1998) in her essay “Muslim Women in India: A Minority Within a Minority” in the book *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity* states that “The status and role of Muslim women in India is inextricably linked to the political, economic, and social survival of the Muslim community in India; to developments in Indian society; and to the position of all Indian women” (251). Their triply marginalized selves are ‘linked’ and dependent on various factors which overshadow their ‘beings’ as individuals equal to men around them. Their religion and then their gender endorse and tag them as ‘a minority within a minority’. Though India defines ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ by religion what M.J. Akbar states is considerably true to its nature: ‘Minority’ and ‘majority’ are not, therefore, a function of numbers, but a derivative of empowerment. If a community feels empowered, it does not see itself as a minority. Empowerment, obviously, has an economic definition as much as a political one” (Shaban 26). Religion, diverse cultural influences, socioeconomic conditions, nationalism – all put them in a dilemma of identity. Religion as a strong string guides and dictates them certain codes of conduct, behaviour, thinking process, etc. in public as well as in the private world. Their participation in public and private life is controlled by various factors. There are ample studies and data showing the status of Muslim women in contemporary India. The details based on National surveys (2004) are appallingly disturbing and yet thought-provoking at the same time.

The study found that 26 percent of educated Muslim women had illiterate husbands. This low male education level would create further pressures to impose ceilings on girls’ education, so as not to render them “unmarriageable”. In addition, the low age of marriage is a major inhibiting factor. At the national level, the mean age of marriage of Muslim girls is very low at 15.6 years, and in the rural north it falls to an appalling 13.9 years. Low marriage age has a number of other adverse implications; it is usually associated with high early fertility, which affects women’s nutrition and health status; it tends to reduce
women’s autonomy and agency in the marital home and to create conditions of patriarchal subservience that get perpetuated through life and it thereby after reduces self-worth. (Ghosh “Muslim Women”)

Thus, early-age marriages, early motherhood, easy divorces, no financial independence, limited access to education, no free dialogue with elder generation, no role in decision making, etc. lead them toward submerging into a sea of darkened and tormented psyche. Different Muslim societies in India have different controlling factors over their women. Overall, Muslim women are not found much educated and in public sectors in significant numbers. These internal issues block their ways to success and grow intellectually as well as financially. Thus, the subordination of Muslim women is seen in India. Education and employment rates of Muslim women are also lower in India. In “Education and Employment among Muslims in India: An Analysis of Patterns and Trends” in 2012, Basant writes:

As expected, literacy rates are much lower in rural areas as compared to urban areas but both for males and females, the rates have improved in the last decade, especially after 2004-05. Also the patterns and trends are more or less the same as the aggregate trends… except that literacy rates have not improved very significantly for rural women belonging to Muslim-OBC households. In urban areas the rates of literacy are higher but the improvements have not been that dramatic. Moreover, while for urban females belonging to the Muslim community (both OBC and general) show the same pattern as [the previous survey]. (11)

Hence, as the scenario does not seem to be improved much over the years, it is apparently disturbing to see Muslim women bound with the shackles of their religious, cultural and societal norms and conditions. They have been in a constant struggle facing a controlling patriarchal power from within the circle. They are under a constant surveillance of family and society members as well as of religious leaders. They are torn from various fronts in this multi-cultural, multi-dimensional world. It is true that

Muslim women are racialized and have to face increasing social and sexual control within their own communities and families, with no
established alternative they can turn to for affirmation. Expressions of ambivalence occur because women are pulled in different directions by Islamism, Orientalism, and the splitting that is happening within the two. The struggle for agency and identity as a Muslim woman thus becomes a site of both affirmation and disorientation. (Saliba 333)

Not only ‘Islamism’ and ‘Orientalism’ but also secularism and progressivism split the individuality of Muslim women in India. These women face multi-front struggles and seek support from the diverse resources including government intervention, legal reforms, non-government organisations, non-Muslim kinship and the religion Islam itself. The suppression leads to protest and protest converts into a movement. In 2013, the article “Socio-Economic and Educational Status of Muslim Women: A Comparative Outlook” states:

Over the last two decades, the position of Muslim women particularly their social situation have come to the notice of the academicians, policy makers and development authorities of India. it has been considered that the Muslim women are the most deprived segment of the country’s population. Muslim women play a critical role in well-being and very survival of Muslim families. But unfortunately, for various reasons the gender disparity is very much conspicuous in Muslim society. (Hossain 93)

Contemporary scene is very much a result of past and historical events and implications. On visiting the past, however, India as a nation with patriarchal history before and after independence has its history of feminist movements too with and without addressing Muslim women’s questions and identity. It can be concisely put here with Ghosal’s words:

In India under the colonial influence and as a part of the nineteenth century reform movement, the feminist ideas began to spread. During the pre-independence period feminist questions revolves around some major issues like the spread of education, prohibition of child marriage, abolition of Sati system, widow remarriage, etc…. in colonial India social reform movements modernized gender relations in some upper caste families while dispossessing lower caste women of their rights in
attempts to homogenize the women as a group renouncing caste and community specific practices and problems. This has compelled scholars like Anupama Rao to identify feminism in the colonial period as ‘Brahminical feminism’. (794)

Muslim women’s questions were not incorporated in the mainstream feminist movements in the pre-independence era. Hence, there were no solid strands of Muslim women’s voice except in Bengal with large Muslim population which is now Bangladesh. For the same, the reference can be provided with the example of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and her contribution to Muslim women’s education and liberation who is called as “the foremost ‘feminist’ writer, educationalist and activist of colonial Muslim Bengal” (Hasan 179). Though in 1875, Sayyid Ahmad Khan founded the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College which is now known as Aligarh Muslim University; it is significant to state that “in addition to the patriarchal opposition to female education during rokeya’s time, Muslim women did not have the support of the colonial government to have modern education” (Hasan 193). This can be attested with the evidence that while Bethune College in Calcutta was established in 1849 specially for Hindu women, the founding of Lady Brabourne College for Muslim women started exactly after 90 years in 1939 which marked the beginning of their equal access to public education. Thus, the double discrimination of Muslim women can be clearly seen from governmental non-intervention on one front and on the other, their religious denial for support. During the struggle for independence, notably, Hazrat Mahal, Asghari Begum and Bi Amma’s contribution remained remarkable and important. During partition, the loss of human lives especially innocent women and children ignited a feminist consciousness among Indian women irrespective of their religion. The abduction, rapes, forced marriages and killings of women marked a black stain on the face of humanity forever. Women were used as objects for patriarchal resentment, animosity, vengeance and selfishness. Bodies of Muslim women during partition riots and other communal riots were treated as “repository of the honor of the community” (Gangoli 12). Moreover, historians presenting data and pragmatic research with adequate facts do not sufficiently put the reality into words. Their data and bland facts cannot present pain and anxiety of people. Creative writers reveal a different and true face of struggle. Literature written on partition pain justifies the pain of divided families,
raped and abducted women, killed children, etc. in a true-to-life way. Gradually, Muslim women started forgetting the pain of partition and started joining hands in hands with Indian non-Muslim population as a democratic stance towards freedom in a free and own country. But as the partition had already ingrained the idea of religious bias, the ‘minority within a minority’ started facing fundamentalism in almost all the strata of life. In a scholarly article “Feminism Faces Fundamentalism in India” (1994) Radha Kumar points out mainly two agitations kindled the spirit of feminism and raised many questions in India which are (1) “the Muslim Women’s Bill campaign of 1985-86”, and (2) “the campaign against sati-daha (widow immolation) in 1987-88”. (81) She mentions that both the campaigns were opposed by fundamentalists in the process of communal and caste allegations. Religious-cultural definitions of women were questioned and their movements were propagated as anti-religious. The direct attack on feminism in both Hindu and Muslim women’s cases was significant to raise questions on “religious, ethnic and community identities, nationalism and nationalities, the nature of representative democracy and the state” (82). The most important juncture in Indian Muslim Women’s history which triggered the entire country on account of their rights and justice is the Shah Bano case in 1985. Her application for maintenance in 1978 ignited the entire issue of legal rights of deserted or divorced Muslim women. The government left the decision to Muslims and obviously Muslim male religious scholars. The demand to reframe clauses in Shariah Law represented the feminist perspective in Islamic belief. But soon Banatwala’s Bill was in action; it was “a Bill seeking to exclude Muslim women from the purview of Section 125 was introduced into Parliament by a Muslim League Member of Parliament (MP), GM Banatwala” (Kumar 84). The religious interference into law and order distorted the possibilities of elevation of Muslim women in India. The case provoked various issues and forced people to contemplate in different directions.

The signature petition, jointly organised by feminists, social reform and far left groups, argued further that all personal laws ‘have meant inequality and subordinate status for women in relation to men’, and therefore religion ‘… should only govern the relationship between a human being and god, and should not govern the relationship between man and man or man and woman’ (Extract from the opening statement of the petition). Against this, the government definition of secularism
appeared to be radically different. According to the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi ‘Secularism is the right of every religion to co-exist with another religion. We acknowledge this by allowing every religion to have its own secular laws.’ (Quoted in a brochure for the film in Secular India, made by Mediastorm) (Kumar 86)

Thus, the definition of secularism was questioned and addressed by many feminists, progressives and liberals time and again. What Kumar argues is reflective of logical and critical understanding of the statement: “if this statement is not to be dismissed as sheer nonsense, then the only meaning to be extracted from it is that he defined personal laws as being secular – presumably on the grounds that as religion here defined the relationships between human beings... Religion, then, could formulate secularism” (86) Moreover, the entire case and relentless aftermath gained support for Islamic fundamentalism rather than secularism in general and feminism in particular. But at the same time, the case ignited the feminist consciousness among progressive Muslims who started interpreting and contemplating the ultimate text the Quran and its patriarchal interpretations on their own. Therefore, it is justified to put the need of in the given words:

There is [therefore] a real need for contemporary Muslim women constantly to engage with Islamic issues, mount a challenge against the monopoly of interpretation and constantly maintain their struggle against the control by patriarchal religious authorities. Contemporary Muslim women also need to change the terms of the Islamic discourse in their respective countries and at the same time try to build bridges between secular and progressive Muslim feminists and human rights activists. (Othman 340)

When it comes to interpretation and re-interpretation, as discussed in the earlier chapter, all the human beings are advised to read, understand the context and follow accordingly the Quranic verses with the help of Hadith and other treatises. In the case of Muslim women in India, the term ‘Islamic Feminism’ is not in a popular stream as a discourse, yet the historical events protesting for Muslim Women’s rights and seeking appropriate modification in Muslim Personal Laws fall into the same
movement. Sylvia Vatuk in 2007 writes in “Islamic Feminism in India: Indian Muslim Women Activists and the Reform of Muslim Personal Law”:

Islamic feminism in India is not yet an organized ‘social movement’, in the strict sense of that term. It is being pursued by a rather amorphous assortment of individuals and groups, all engaged in avid discussion and debate about the negative impact of MPL (Muslim Personal Law) on women but only loosely organized in terms of action. These women share similar goals – to spread awareness of ‘the correct teachings of Islam’ about women’s rights (huquq-e-niswan) and find ways to help women gain practical access to them. And they employ similar arguments to justify their calls for legal reform. (492)

It is obvious to note that Muslim-led women’s NGOs began to make an appearance in the late 1980s which were not only supporting Muslim women but also welcomed depressed, deserted, divorced women to help them from all the religions and belief systems, among them the oldest being Aawaaz-e-Niswaan (Voice of women) was established in 1987. There have been a various number of networks and coalitions of Muslim women’s organisations from then onwards. These NGOs have been working on the Muslim women’s issues under Islamic laws. “Issues of child custody, guardianship and adoption, women’s rights in the martial home, compulsory registration of marriage and divorce, mahr (dower), a proposed model nikah Nama (standard marriage contract) and the need for a ban on ‘instantaneous divorce’ were on the agenda.” (Vatuk 500) All India Muslim Women’s Rights Network (MWRN) in 1999 set a milestone while the formation of an All India Muslim Women’s Personal Law Board (AIMWPLB) in 2005 embarks a new dawn of hope wherein it stands with a motive to detain the patriarchal All India Muslim Personal Law Board. AIMWPLB has been working on Muslim women’s issues prolifically. “We have framed the new Nikahnama strictly in accordance with the tenets of Islam, which clearly prohibit any kind of harassment or oppression of a married woman by her husband” said AIMWPLB president Shaista Amber. She added that “the Shariat also entitles a woman to take separation even when the husband refuses to grant a divorce” (AIMWPLB official website). These individual efforts, organisations and networks fight against fundamentalism in Islam with the help of Islamic, Quranic support. The remarkable lack and absence of Muslims in policy making, government sectors and
major leading positions in private and semi-government organizations show a non-representative leadership of Muslims. While the religious fanatical preaching in religious institutions lead them towards self hampering situations. The whole matrix of exclusion and inclusion of Muslims from the mainstream is notably devastating. Mahajan comments that “giving communities cultural rights brings with it a different set of anxieties” and “the most significant of these relate to the treatment of women” (119). As almost all cultures in whole world place women in a secondary position, “special political rights, or self-governance rights, to a minority community raise concerns of minority nationalism” and hence “even though there is a compelling need to accommodate diversity, the concern for diversity has to go hand in hand with the equally important concern for equal rights for all citizens” (119-120). ‘Diversity’ has to be sustained but the equal treatment of all diverse cultures and religions must be the concerned factor. Muslim women, indeed, seek the equal treatment but at the same time, religious leaders do not let the government intervene. Government policies with religious support and guiding principles for Muslim women in India have seen turns and twists in different acts namely (1) Muslim Personal Law Sharia Application Act 1937, (2) Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939 and the controversial (3) Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Act, 1986. Then the questions on Law and Order remain unanswerable.

Muslim women activists in India do not have to contend with the force of an authoritarian Islamic state. But their adversary, a well-entrenched and widely influential male religious establishment, is only slightly less intimidating. Insofar as they choose to confine themselves to ‘changing MPL from within’, rely on the Quran for guidance and side with the ulama in their rejection of state intervention, they risk having to scale back their aspirations for gender equity under the law. (Vatuk 491)

The debates (on law) among feminists can be seen as an emerging phenomenon after and with respect to the rape-case of ‘nirbhaya’, violence on Kashmiri women, acid attacks victimization and frequent cases of violence on women not only physical but emotional, social, psychological, economical in different parts of India. Arguably, they are questioning the prevailing patriarchy and its violation in the best way possible. Indian feminists, in general, have interrogated juridical policies and asked
the government to create laws for all the women. Gangoli (2007) in *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India* estimates three ways in which feminists have intervened in the area of law. 1) “To expose the working of patriarchal controls and structures within law, for instance, critiquing civil marriage and divorce laws that extend more rights to men than women”, 2) “to unpack the plural ways in which law operates, including offering some redress to women in situations of domestic violence” and 3) “to campaign to extend rights to women, such as campaigns against sexual assault and rape”. (1) She furthermore states that as a movement Indian feminists have been labeled as westernized and thus they have to confront the fundamentalist forces. Such forces allege these feminists to have forgotten their “Indian realities of family structures” (1). Indian feminists have struggled to influence the law and order in a systematic way in spite of several ‘claims of being westernised’ or modernised. The role of Muslim women in demanding law and order is considerably unheard and avoided. Their two-fold struggle is on governmental and on religious fronts. Muslim male participants in a very few numbers support the cause, and that is one of the reasons why Mahajan states:

> Over the time, the personal laws of both the Parsi and the Christian community have been reformed internally through the initiatives of the members themselves. The same has not, however, occurred in the case of the Muslim Personal Law. The question what role the state can play in ensuring more just treatment for Muslim women is an issue that has divided the community and the nation. (120)

The conscious stance of the state in Muslim women’s liberation policies is politically beneficial for the government as well. The state, government, progressive minds, NGOs and various organisations, as well as common individuals, need to annihilate the growing fundamentalism against Muslim women.

Their doubly muted existence in Indian democracy alienates them from the circles outside their homes and societies. It is indeed a matter of embarrassment and self-pity for them to stand aloof and alienated amongst ‘the others’ than Muslims in India. Muslim female body in her community is over protected with ‘burqa’ while outside her community she is subjected to humiliation, derogatory comments, etc. If she removes it and mingles with the dominant culture around her, she is labeled as
modernized, westernized, anti-Islamic and slut inside their religious, social circles while wearing it she faces difficulties and humiliation imposed by others outside. It seems natural in such settings that the confidence of Muslim women as being in the minority in India diminishes to the level of self-disgust and hatred for self and others as well. “Even those of higher class women in ‘purdah’ or ‘burqa’ automatically become the synonym of conventional, orthodox, suppressed and confined image of Islam. The time a man gazes at a female in a ‘veil’,” unintentionally or say “conditionally, the perspective changes.” A man gazes at a female, in most of the cases, as an object. But here, in this case, female in ‘veil’ or considerably a Muslim female becomes somewhat lesser than the image of an ‘object’. “The ultimate function of a veil, according to so-called leaders of Islam, is to protect a lady from ill intentional male gaze. But contrarily, it serves the opposite purpose wherein the ‘veil’ symbolizes her doubly muted objectification.” (Qureshi 11) The mandatory ‘purdah’, ‘burqah’ or the veil hides their real beings, their real selves. Tulika Bahuguna in Panorama of World Literature, in her article “Purdah and Zanana: Re-visioning conventions”, has quoted many of scholars’ views on ‘Purdah’. (127) She has quoted Eunice de Souza’s words defining ‘purdah’ “not just the burqua… but the elaborate codes of seclusion and feminine modesty used to protect and control the lives of women.” Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin call it “dividing line between tradition and modernity”. On the other hand, Zenana is, in Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia, “the physical segregation of living space” when Burton calls Zanana as “shorthand for Indian women’s imprisonment” (127). The ‘purdah’ and ‘zanana’ are for sure the codification of male dominance over female freedom in the name of Allah. The objectification of female body shows the darker side of male psyche.

Literature and Indian Muslim Women

Most of the Muslim women do echo the pain of these lines of the poem ‘First Fig’ from A Few Figs from the Thistles (1920) where Edna St. Vincent Millay, an American lyrical poetess sings:

My candle burns at both ends;

It will not last the night;

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends –
It gives a lovely light!

Literature is a complex analysis and representation of any group of people presents their culture, religion, region, psychology, economic conditions, a socio-political scenario in their lives, etc. with appropriate time setting. It is rightly said by Masoodul Hasan that “Literature is both a determiner and denominator of culture” (Kidwai 15). It deals with the individuals, inter-group equations and cross-responses of the people at the same time. One can observe that extensive literature has been written in India in many different languages; to be more precise – in national language Hindi, various regional languages and International language English. Each regional language has its attributes and credentials to mesmerize the readers. If it is Gujarati or Telugu, Malayalam or Punjabi, Urdu or Kannada – the literary expressions of each is suggestively charismatic in its way. Literature in The English language has emerged in India as its own and is no more a foreign language. One of the optimum gifts from colonial rule is certainly this language and its adequateness. The precise importance of literature in The English language is that the whole world in this global village can recognize and comprehend the cultural and social aspects of India. It is argued very often that Muslim women are stereotyped as signifier who are misplaced and frequently displayed without their consent in the age of growing paranoia about Islam. Literature becomes a synonymous to politics, society and economics of a nation.

Needless to say:

Literary domain is reflection of the political arena as well as the fact that the literary is an agent which aids and abets the political scenario. Recognizing the power of literature to affect world politics by correcting and reinforcing stereotypes, writers need to acknowledge how their work can be used as an instrument of ideology in the service of dynamic of power. (Al-Sudeary 69)

The last two centuries have represented Islam and Muslims in western discourses as “backward and uncivilized” in almost all the forms of electronic and print media as well as in literary and scholarly canvass. The representation of East by West is hegemony of perception as well defined in Orientalism (1978) by Edward Said. Literature has the capacity to mould the nation-wide mental make-up as it can transcend the readers from the depths of ignorance to a wide world of realistic
imagination, knowledge, experience and suggestiveness. After 9/11, the representation of Islam and Muslims has more worsened and tagged them as fanatics. Muslims, after that, have been seen as a “source of fear and threat” in the world. (Ameri “Sacred Spaces”) 

The character-sketch of Islam and Muslims in Western literature has created a stereotypical image which emerges to destroy whatever is around them. This representation is as much social as political and an Orientalist perception as well. Muslim women as scapegoats and men as the only patriarchs seem to have created an adverse effect which is not untrue to some extent. Shahnaz Khan in her article “Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space” finely puts forth the entire devaluation of Muslim women and states: “Continued devaluation of Muslim women in the popular imagination and in academic scholarship will no doubt generate disorientation in those women who are coded as Muslim or who self-identify as Muslim” (Saliba 332). The Orientalist notion of the Muslim women as equivalent to passivity must be challenged continually by the notion of Muslim women as active participants in this global scenario. For that deconstruction of racist discourses is needed to “diffuse the rigid boundaries between Islam and the West and gives women individual freedom of choice at the intersection of the two, without being labeled as anti-Islamic by their families and communities or as “fanatics” by those outside” (Saliba 332). One of the vital roles of literature among readers should be that of deconstructing the stereotypical, racist discourses and generating empathy and solidarity with a sense of support to marginalised and a politicized group of people particularly women. It should visualize the ideal existence of both the culture, religion and their adherents while promoting the positive aspects of understanding of the basic flaws in that reality. The Oriental discourse by nature is based on that discrimination which eventually has affected the world view about the Orientals.

Muslim characters in Indian writings in English can be seen frequently in Monahar Malgonkar (The Princess, 1963), Anita Desai (In Custody, 1984), Shashi Deshpande (Small Remedies, 2000) and Shashi Tharoor (Riot, 2001) to name a few and many alike wherein various themes are incorporated like that of poverty, female subjugation, partition pain, nostalgia, political arena and so on so forth in stereotypical representation. Muslim female writers in Urdu and Hindi literature have justified the subject of female subjugation, Islamic justice, poverty, partition, riots and
female sexuality in their works. Mainly Qurratulain Hyder (1927-2007) and Ismat Chughtai (1941-1967) are the most influential feminist writers in Urdu who not only inspired Urdu writers but writers in many other languages too. The prime objective to write on feminist subjects fiercely is to justify that radical fictional writing is a need of the day in India to shake the Indians from their stupor. To analyze the stature of Indian Muslim women with the help of literature, it is imperative to peep inside the fiction which embodies the history, culture, feminist significance and reality based imagination and thus Noor Zaheer (1952) with her novel My God is a Woman (2008) stands uniquely among all the contemporary writers to investigate the presence of feminism in general and Islamic Feminism in particular among Indian Muslim women.

**Noor Zaheer’s My God is a Woman:**

वो अक्सर कहा करते थे कि रौशनी वह होती है, जो चौंकाती या चकचांदी नहीं करती है, बल्कि, आहिस्त्त्वी से दूर तक फैलती है और देर तक अपने दायरे को रौशन रखती है!

Wo aksar kaha karte the ki roushni wah hoti hai, jo chaunkati

Ya Chakachaundh nahi karti hai, balki, aahistagi se dur tak

Failti hai aur der tak apne daayre ko roushan rakhti he!

(Zaheer “Mere Hisse ki Roshnai” 15)

The definition of ‘Roshni’, the luminosity by Sajjad Zaheer, the renowned poet in Urdu, is pertinent to describe the very essence of his youngest daughter, Noor Zaheer. The persona of Noor Zaheer (1958) – an author, social activist, leftist, Marxist, researcher and Kathak dancer is illuminating in its true sense. She is a recipient of SAARC Writers Literary Award, Times Fellowship for Research, Senior Fellowship by Government of India and Writer in Residence by Sahitya Academy Delhi. Her major works include Silent Dunes, Raging Forests, Delhi Hindi Academy Award winner Mere Hisse ki Roshnai, Surkh Karavan ke Hamsafar (Pakistan travelogue), Ret Par Khoon, Paththar Ke Sainik, Aaj Ke Naam (Biography of Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz), and many short stories in different anthologies in Urdu, Hindi and
English and also in translations in many languages. Her young mind witnessed her parents’ struggle for social uplift of Indians irrespective of their gender and religion. Her mother, Razia Zaheer too was a reformist and a writer. The falsehood of religious practices, the fundamental attitude towards female liberation, inequality to lower castes, inadequate funds and injustice to farmers and artists, social inequality, the role of religion in governance, etc. are the basic issues of concern for the author to use her pen on. Her ardent interest in Buddhism is visible through her Ph.D. thesis *Buddhism on the Silk Route*, focusing on Central Asia. Her plays and theatre activities reflect what ‘Epic Theatre’ proposes that play should not cause the spectator to identify emotionally with the characters or action before him or her, but should instead provoke rational self-reflection and a critical view of the action on the stage. Noor Zaheer explores the theatre as a forum for political ideas with the same treatment not only in her theatrical works but also in other genres of writing too. Hence, her fictions incorporate political, historical and social significance with an interrogative approach towards Islam as a religion for her characters.

Her novel *My God is a Woman* (2008) is a representation of real issues with fictional characters and situations questioning Muslim Personal Laws and Legislation with a base of real controversial Shah Bano Case as a subplot in India. This selected novel for critical analysis is set in Lucknow in the beginning, and then the story moves forward with different locations like Delhi, Allahabad and Indore and lastly adds Shah Bano case as a fictional subplot. The novel covers a time span from last few years before independence in India till Shah Bano case controversy. The writer confesses in the Preface that:

This book has been written after 22 years of the introduction of the Bill for the protection of Muslim women; more than two decades after the Supreme Court’s historic verdict upholding the high court’s judgement of granting maintenance to a Muslim woman, Shah Bano. … The answer they received had been the same – it is up to the Muslims to make any changes in their laws. More than two decades on, we still await an initiative from a democratic set-up, which professes equality for all its citizens, towards giving a section of women the right to live with dignity. … It is time to fight back. It is time to speak and call a spade a spade because it is what it is. (Preface)
She has incorporated instances from Quran and from Prophet’s life (Sunnah) in the novel to create awareness that Islam is not that rigid which is being shown and propagated around us. Moreover, she also questions the relevance of age-old conventions prescribed in the Quran in globally capitalist societies. The novel opens up the old wounds on Muslim women’s dignity and self-esteem and with that, the novel encourages an old debate to rise on the surface. Her recent book *Denied by Allah: Angst against the Archaic Laws of Halala, Triple Talaq, Mut’ah Marriage and Khula* (2015) is a vigorous attempt to incorporate her experiences with women from different areas in *Jan Sunvai* through the fictional way of writing. During the discussion on this book, there was ‘a disruption’ at the World Book Fair in Delhi. Dholakia and his team stated:

People’s Alliance for Secularism and Democracy (PADS) is alarmed to learn that the short story writer and novelist Noor Zaheer, who is the author of a new book titled ‘Denied by Allah’ faced a disruption of a discussion on her book at the World Book Fair in Delhi 22 February 2015; we condemn any attempts to threaten and to silence an exponent for women’s rights in India. We fully defend her rights to publically signal how religious laws, injunctions and practices impede on women’s rights. We would like to alert all in the media, and secular minded groups that they should provide space to highlight the views expressed by Noor Zaheer. (“Expression of Concern”)

Thus, non-Muslims along with Muslims through social networking sites, media and open discussions show their concern for a secluded and ignored group of India – Muslim women’s rights. Through such narratives, Zaheer argues that Muslim women in India have been suffering in the name of Allah and through such fierce voice against the patriarchal propagation of Islam and malpractices in the name of Islam must be heard and discussed with all the forces irrespective of religion, gender, caste of political belief. For the same, she has been using different forms of fiction (novels, short stories and dramas) which trigger the social milieu. Many movements for women emancipation have changed the course of the history with relevant changes in the national policies and laws.
In the Shah Bano case controversy, the national policies and laws played a very significant role in furthering and supporting religious fundamentalism over secularism and equality for all in India. The novel *My God is a Woman* is thus a milestone work dealing with Muslim women in India with the focus on Safia Jafri as a strong protagonist and archetypal character. The novel is divided into thirty-three chapters followed by an interlude. The preface is short and talks of novel’s relevance in contemporary India. The story is centered around Safia Jafri and people around her; specifically her husband Abbas Jafri, daughter Sitara, parents-in-law in Lucknow, her university education in Allahabad University, theatre group Kendra, artists and Amrita in Delhi after assassination of her husband Abbas and then in her old age dying a tragic death as a reformist in Indore with the hope to support Shah Bano. The novel received a very welcoming reception from almost all the fronts in India and abroad. The third person narration effectively sketches the pain and tribulations the husband-wife duo encounters with throughout the novel. From a very young age to death in age-old, Safia’s life and struggles are documented with the keen and impressive style of writing.

**Issues of Marriages and Divorces**

The character of rebellious and reformist Abbas which literally in Arabic means a Lion, a son of Sir Safdar Ali Jafri does frequently question the status quo of Islamic belief system in India. The novel opens with a description of newlywed Safia with Abbas Jafri in a background of elegant Lucknow. Safia’s “long and arduous journey” (1) from her religiously conventional family to rich, Barristers and Knights family to university education to reformist movements to rebellious life is the remarkable life-changing experience. Safia gradually acquires a new identity, rejects wearing ‘burqa’ and starts to practice an academic, reformist life and proves to be a ‘lion’s share’, ‘best friend’ to Abbas; as ‘pure and untroubled’ as her name suggests in Arabic. Safia’s mother-in-law Zeenat Begum, on the contrary, defines a stereotypical image of a Muslim ‘Begum’ who buys female servants for household chores, beats them, rejects Safia’s bold and decisive existence, curses everything which is radical and progressive in nature with all the boastfulness of wealth and riches.

The description of a Muslim wedding in a rich Lucknowite family with all its brouhaha suggests the rich culture of Muslims there. But a stark contrast can be
visualized between the elaborate expensive marriages and Islam’s propagation of simple, economical marriage as a contract between two individuals. Different cultural influences, boastfulness of riches, women’s objectification, dowry system and many superstitions followed by a specific patriarchy lead the Muslims to use tremendous capital on their weddings. The concept of ‘Mahr’/ ‘Mehr’ (women’s security in the form of money or property fixed at the time of marriage) in Islam was a unique and revolutionary custom to protect women financially. In the pre-Islamic times, the price was given to the father of the bride or oldest male member while in the Islamic period it started to be given to the bride without which the marriage was not legal. This money (sometimes a piece of land or any other wealth) remains as bride’s property. It can be used whenever, wherever and in any way she wants but it is used after the marriage is dissolved. In the historical dictionary of Islam, Quranic Surah 4:4 and 4:20 are quoted which say:

> And give the women (on marriage) their dower as an obligation; but if they, on their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it with right good cheer…But if ye decide to take one wife in place of another, even if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, take not the least bit back. (Adamec 197)

In different countries and places, the amount of ‘Mahr’ varies significantly. Somewhere a token or symbolic amount is given to a bride while in some clans, groups and regions the demand of ‘Mahr’ is made so high that the groom’s family face severe destitution. Governments in Islamic countries have fixed some limited amount to be paid. But it is not practiced uniformly. Zaheer treats the issue tactfully with a fabric of fiction by asserting the Lucknowite Muslims’ adherences to Islamic laws. Safia’s father Syed Murtuza Mehdi, while discussing the marriage prospects with Abbas’ family, demands 50,000 ashrafis as suggested by Mirza Sahib as Abbas was looked down as an “infidel” and “heathen” (2) by Muslims. The novel depicts Abbas as a revolutionary communist but at the same time the most hated individual by fundamentalists. His book Fireworks is described as a threat to Muslims’ belief system and is banned. The bargaining continues with an argument which seems reasonable: “Sons in our family do not divorce their wives. Women are respected and honoured in clans like ours.” (2) The modesty and understanding of Abbas’ family glitter when they agree to accept the demanded ‘mahr’ amount. On the other hand, the
totally opposite incident is cited in the novel wherein daughter of Mujataba Sahib, a very modest Muslim commit suicide after her husband deserted her. A stark reality of discrepancies in ‘mahr’ system is again highlighted by stressing that Mujataba Sahib’s daughter was granted “fatnahi meher” of five rupees and deserted by his “English educated son-in-law” (49). (Bibi Fatmah, Prophet’s daughter, was granted minimum Mahr at her time of marriage which is still considered as an ideal mahr proudly in many Muslim households). Being a Syed, the most elegant and supreme caste among Muslims, Mujataba Sahib himself had fixed this amount as a gesture of devout Muslim following ‘Sunnah’ – the ideal living strategies lived by the Prophet. Mujataba Sahib’s daughter could not bear the humiliation and committed suicide. If the ‘mahr’ amount was fixed with a higher amount, she could have felt less burdensome to her father financially at least. The psychology of Muslim daughters has been distorted by the so-called social norms in a dreadful way that they are extra responsibility and made for others to serve. If their marriages fail, then they do not have a reputed place in their parents’ home and society. His only child’s premature death changes his life completely. Mujataba Sahib soon becomes a legend for opening the Sajeda Hussain Muslim Girls School promoting female education though the uproar against him is predictable when people around him said: “What? A school for Muslim girls? The man was raving mad. Even madness should have its limits. The man deserved a good beating.” (49) Education for Muslim women seems unthinkable and inexplicable for religiously conventional people. In the novel, Zaheer through her characters uses all the possible persuasive ways to make the Muslims aware of their rights under the umbrella of religion. Mujataba Sahib addresses the gathering:

I need not remind the gathering that Islam had been a storm of liberal and progressive ideas; that it had brought about radical and much needed changes and that Allah had bestowed the Holy Quran as a book to be referred and read by every Muslim. …No one can deny the fact that Prophet Mohammad’s first wife, Bibi Khadija was an educated woman, operating her own business…. If Allah had wished to deny education to women, he would have restricted them from reading the Holy Quran. (77)

He offered the job of a teacher to Safia and received a considerate support from progressive Muslims after a lot of hurdles and opposition. Muslim societies need
reformists who can build schools, universities and hubs for progressive and rational activities rather than mosques and Dargaahs which are to show their love for Islam. Safia teaches the girls to think and respond rationally and logically; arranged physical training in open ground and made them remove their burqas and naqaabs to feel the sun rays and fight back the breeding bacteria in their hair and bodies which ultimately results in an opposition from their parents. Mujataba Sahib with sore voice and heavy heart fires Safia at very crucial time when she is in need of money the most – during pregnancy and in the absence of Abbas in his imprisonment; blaming her to turn the female students away from God. All his efforts to persuade Muslims to educate their girls seemed to go in vein. Hence, his purpose was questioned by Safia showing the mental make-up of Muslims in those days:

You are trying to give education to the Muslim girls so that they would be more acceptable to their educated husbands. … And acceptance by men is the end to all female desires. You think she should not have a better status, any more rights, any more empowerment than that? … And you accept that an educated woman would still accept everything as it is handed to her. The education that you are giving shall never turn her into a reasoning, logical, analyzing being that education aim for. This reasoning, logical being shall never see or realize the lack of reason and the contradictions of the Shariat. She shall never understand that God by himself could never have been so unjust to one half of his believers. The one who treats colour, race, labour, status with equality, would He treat the two sexes so differently? Why do you want man to have the right to accept or reject a woman? Why don’t you want some riders put on his constant effort to insult the woman who sleeps with him, begets his children, looks after his house and hearth? Why does not she have the right to say the triple talaaq and be rid of an unjust partnership?" (120-121)

For Safia, education aims at forming women logical, reasoning and analytical and not for making them acceptable by their future husbands. Women and education have come out to be a contrast in Muslim societies in recent times too. It is surprising to note that there is a single Muslim woman pilot in India till date. Sarah Hameed Ahmed, a Bengaluru girl of 25 who is the only known Muslim among the 600 odd
women pilots employed in the Indian aviation sector, expresses that “I feel sad that many girls, especially from my community, do not find a place in this field or any other field for that matter. They [Muslim Indian women] are neither allowed to take up higher education nor pursue any profession of their choice.” (Azhar “Meet Sarah”) But one just can’t turn deaf ears to the plight of Muslim women in interior villages and towns. During ‘Jansunvais’ and interviews with such women, Zaheer felt to take the issues on the surface with a propagative agenda among non-Muslims too.

The character of Mujataba Sahib stands out to be a perfect example of such educated Muslims, who wish to see changes in Shariat yet choose to do nothing about the same. To take the issues on the surface and discuss them on public platforms seem disgusting and shameful to Muslim males while it becomes an internal matter not to make it a public issue outside their circles. Then what comes out of such internal contemplations is very much seen in the practice. Zaheer does state in this regard in Denied by Allah (2015)

Every time I have tried to discuss the Quran, Hadith or the Shariah in secular, democratic platforms, I have been told that these discussions should be held within the Muslim community and any change has to be initiated by Muslim scholars. I disagree. The wider the discussion, the more embarrassment it would cause to people who are comfortable in letting things remain as they are for the Muslim women. (Author’s Note Section)

In this regard, it seems imperative to take on the task of changes in Shariat with relevance to twenty first century. Abbas’ attempts to rectify the Shariat laws lead him towards a miserable death. When he is questioned by his party members, he replies firmly: “Yes, I consider many laws of the Shariat outdated. It is high time they were repealed, and new ones replaced them. … I have not attempted to rewrite the Shariat. I have only made a claim that there is an ardent need to do so.” (142) But the party expels him for six years with the condition not to be found making any anti-party activities. His pain is unbearable as he was expecting his party, at least, to be on his side. He is broken and humiliated. Safia helps him understand that his cause is still alive though the party has died for him. After igniting the spirit for life and cause, Safia waits for her husband to start a journey in Himalayan valleys and the story takes
a jump of a few years where Safia reminds of the darkness of that night in stream of
consciousness technique:

Dark, like the night when she waited for Abbas to come back with
Katayanji and Irfan; the night when they would have planned a future
in a Himalayan village; the night when she and Abbas would have set
out on a new journey, the night when they would have burnt their
dreams of changing the world and set out to change a small village, the
night when a new cause would have been born. The night that never
came. Instead, came a lump of bones and flesh, covered with a grey
and white *dushala* with large patches of red. A mass they said was
Abbas. (146-147)

The killer is caught and killed by Ahmed bhai and these murders “for nothing” change
Safia’s entire life (147). After Abbas’ assassination, remaining half of the story
lingers around a Muslim-Hindu bond in the form of Safia-Amrita friendship, arts,
music, theater performances, puppet shows, classical dance and long-lasting desires
and nostalgia of Safia. The emergence to discuss ‘internal’ matters in public with all
possible bodies of different authorities with their perceptions must arise to take a call
on it. Zaheer has been called to discuss her views through fiction and non-fiction on
public platform nowadays with different governing bodies of the country including
Mullah, Muftis and Political personas in different parts of the country. Safia in the
novel with her two years daughter Sitaara walks alone on the path of struggle, truth
and independence. With Katyanji’s recommendation, Mrs Govind Ram offers her a
job to manage her theatre company as a manager in Delhi.

Safia’s encounters with different people along with the professors at
Allahabad University are intuitively suggestive for her growth as a character in the
novel. The character of Sadaqat Rehmani, Safia’s classmate, proves to be a Muslim
chauvinist who constantly demoralizes Safia with his dialogues such as: “Women
should not study. … Which respectable household would allow its daughters to work?
They would end up cooking and keeping house. It only spoils their brains, and they
become an easy prey to Satan. Imagine women from respectable Muslim household
have given up purdah! … One reason women should be educated is to manage the
economics of the kitchen.” (37-38) Throughout her graduation from the University of
Allahabad, with professors and classmates alike, she learns to tackle with adverse people and situations now and then. Lastly, Sadaqat reveals his love for Safia in a library persuading her to leave Abbas and marry him and settle down in newly emerging Muslim country Pakistan on the verge of Indian Independence and negotiations for partition. He requests her: “Come away with me as my wife. Pakistan comes into existence in a little more than a year. Let us migrate to our homeland. Let us contribute to building it, a new land, a shining star that would be an example before the world…A pure land… a land of the pure.” (42-43) Safia sharply rejects his proposal emphasizing that:

… Instead of the man, I fell in love with his cause. Today I live for that cause and I love Abbas all the more for giving me a cause to live for. Oh yes, Abbas is still very important to me, but what is meaningful is my cause. I do not care for material comforts. Never will. As far as your pure land [to be Pakistan], if it really does come into existence, you are welcome to it. I was born an Indian, and God willing, I shall die as one and be buried here. (43)

The idea of being loyal to one’s country is always given preference over one’s religion as per the Islam. Not only Sadaqat as a possible suitor but also her father tries to convince her for taking divorce from Abbas before the independence and partition as Abbas being a communist freedom fighter was never supposed to leave India and move to Pakistan. Safia’s father insists her for divorce saying that “you are my daughter; you would not wish to live with a non-believer. Anyway, in the case of talaaq, a woman’s father or brother takes the decision. Your consent or dissent is not required.” Here she questions Abbas: “You know that a woman has a right to reject or accept a proposal but no rights when it is a question of getting out of the contract?” who is “quite at sea about what rights Islam has basically given to a woman and which in the process of giving it has taken away.” (97-98) Safia is not ready for triple talaaq as a solution for a peaceful life ahead. Zaheer, in her latest book Denied by Allah, investigates the issues and provides the answers in a point blank way quoting from Quran, Hadith, Shariah Law and Muslim Personal laws with what exactly is in practice in India. She quotes the Quran and says:

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The Triple Talaq in one sitting is not mentioned in the Quran. According to the Quran, there is a waiting period involved between the three times a man can declare the divorce. This allows him to cool down, if he had started the talaq proceeding in anger or under duress of some kind. This gap is provided to resolve disputes and also to be able to determine if a child is being born. (Zaheer “Denied by” 8)

Due to the partition, several Hindu-Muslim families had to suffer and live separately from their life partners and relatives. Zaheer has portrayed pain and suffering of partition among intellectuals keenly to make a point that after communists’ so much of efforts, imprisonments, fatwas and banishment, the partition took place and carved haunting memories on Indian history forever. The partition period distorts the psyche in an ugly manner. In Safia’s case, all were trying to persuade her to divorce from Abbas and migrate to a “promised land”. But partition was not for “those who chose to stay on prided themselves for having chosen secularism over fundamentalism, cultural unity over religious unity, motherhood over the Promised Land and co-existence over ghetoism” (124)

The issues of marriage, mahr, divorce, iddat and re-marriage in Islam are incorporated into the novel tactfully. When Abbas’ book The Flame invites fatwa by clergies who asked all Muslims to cut off ties with Abbas, “a special line had been added to her. She was to divorce Abbas immediately. It would come into force at once. The period of iddat had been waived off. She would be free from the minute she pronounced the wish to be free of the contract.” (134) Otherwise, after divorce, a woman is not allowed to move out of the house for at least three months. Zaheer discusses this issue of ‘Iddat’ in Denied by Allah by quoting a real story of Nuzhat Anees that how strictly a widow (and a divorcee) has to be inside a closed room to avoid any form of the male gaze. She quotes Nuzhat Anees’ words: “No strange male should behold my face in these four months and ten days. The sun is considered to be a male, so I have to observe purdah from it too.” (Zaheer “Denied by” 129) The ridiculously (il-)logical reason implies that if a woman steps “out on the balcony in daylight some strange man might just see” that woman and that “would be sinful” (129) What exactly ‘iddat’ stands for is basically very simple to understand and is justified arguably in the ancient times when DNA testing was not invented. The Quran commands:
When you divorce women, divorce them for the prescribed period, and thereafter reckon the period; and fear Allah, your Lord. And if you are in doubt as to the prescribed period for such of your women as have despaired of monthly courses, then know that the prescribed period for them is three months, and also for such as do not have their monthly courses yet. And as for those who are with child, their period shall be until they are delivered of their burden. And who so fears Allah, He will provide facilities for him in his affair. (qtd. in Zaheer “Denied by” 131)

So a woman has to wait for three months in the case of divorce and four months and ten days in the case of her husband’s death to justify that if she is pregnant, the child belongs to that man. In this case, the modern technical world of the twenty-first century does not actually require the traditional method of knowing whom the newborn baby belongs to at least in urban areas. But ‘iddat’ has become a patriarchal and stringent attitude towards women in most of the Muslim communities. Period of Iddat is thus made “as torturous and unbearable as possible” for women. (132)

However, in the case of Safia in My God is a Woman, clergies decide that Safia needs not to observe a period of ‘iddat’ which shows highly powerful interplay with Shariat Law by the clergies who remain conveniently chauvinist. The Fatwa states that if Safia doesn’t divorce Abbas, the same fatwa will apply on her as a party to the crime of blasphemy against Islam and the Holy Quran.

But what are that heart and soul wrenching issues for extremists in the book The Flames written by Abbas which invites fatwa by the fundamentalists? Open critical questioning on Shariat, claiming that these laws are responsible for the sorry state of the Muslim women and rewriting the Shariat by calling them out-dated were the basic components of The Flames. Jawaharlal Nehru as a character in the novel knew that “Abbas was right… He also knew that the other three writers who had contributed to writing The Flames were responsible intellectuals who had the interest of the community and country at heart.” (124) But the politics is the nastiest of all power-plays after religion to shun the voices of dissents. For this matter, Pantji, the absolute secularist and the person in-charge in Uttar Pradesh was assigned the task to take the necessary things into account by Nehru, but the general election and Muslim votes were the priorities to hump on the grounds for. Most of the time, Abbas is
behind the bars with other communist leaders and writers. Nothing could help the couple and the group to survive their beings, their cause, their passion and concerns for the motherland. The climax of the novel which certainly divides the novel into two halves is shell-shockingly dreadful and yet unsurprising and predictable – the assassination of Abbas. Safia with a small daughter Sitara is homeless as Zeenat Begum disowns Safia and Sitara and no court or her lawyer were answered by saying that “Muslim Personal Law was not to be meddled with, and the case was dismissed.” (148) How fundamentalism grew “like the plague” in the name of religion can be seen with each and every turning page of the novel (122).

**Islamic Fundamentalism**

Abbas Jafri who questions the Shariat Laws in the Indian secular setting in his book *The Flames* has to see the dreadful consequences in his life along with his wife Safia who supports his cause to reform the Shariat Laws. She boosted Abbas’ broken and disheartened spirit when he was expelled from his party as he was blamed to write and publish *The Flames* which made Muslim localities announcing jihad against the Marxist party. The party blamed him to spoil the gusto of their endeavors and made the public against them. Abbas’ genuine dilemma was that the party had thrown him out but how Abbas can ‘throw away his ideals and become a renegade’ (143). Safia full of positivity persuaded Abbas to leave the place not the cause and pick up a village in Himalayan valleys to start anew without any identification. Safia is compared with ‘the calm bowl of oil’ which silently feeds the flame to light the road to progress. Because of a strong woman only, the flame (here, a man of cause) would have permanence and no fizzle out after a flash. She is called ‘the victorious, the empowered, the extraordinary, the omnipotent, the manipulator’. The description of Safia’s strength as a woman energizing Abbas leads to an inference that ‘if God is there and is responsible for the synchronized manipulations of nature, then that God must definitely be a woman.’ (145) While examining, it stands out to be blasphemous for the religious groups to claim God to be a woman. As Islam justifies the Allah as an omnipotent, shapeless, formless and divine heap of light ‘Noor’ which is beyond the classification of gender. Moreover, the other eminent positions too are having no place for women in Islam. It is stated in *Forgotten Queens of Islam*:
There is no feminine form of the words imam or caliph, the two words that embody the concept of power in the Arabic language, the language in which the Koran was revealed. The Lisan al'Arab dictionary informs us without qualification that 'al-khalifatu la yakunu ilia li al-dhakr' (caliph is used only in the masculine). (Mernissi 4)

Inferring God as a woman invoked many fundamentalists to the extent that Zaheer received varieties of threats through emails and other sources where democratic India fails its promise to provide the freedom of speech. Zaheer during an interview on 21st July 2013 by the researcher of this thesis responds to the question:

MQ: Did you find difficulties proclaiming your God a woman? Have you felt threatened by fanatics irrespective of religion, Hindu or Muslim?

NZ: Well fanatics will threaten anything they cannot understand: and since they don’t understand anything, they threaten everything. Yes I was also threatened and asked to apologize for writing this book. My email box is still continuously full of such mails. Strangely enough all threats come from men and not one has come from a woman. (Interview)

To assume God as a woman – a blasphemous acclaim created a havoc of anger, frustration and opposition among fundamentalists across the country.

Muslim women here do not want to be treated like a God, but they strive for mere equality and equity in adverse situations. More than anything, simple questions are to be asked in Indian context here. Do Muslim men treat women equally in the literal sense as it has been preached in the Quran itself? Do they give equal space to women to grow and to be decisive? Not only women but also men should be the vehicle of transformation, and the same idea is enacted with the character of Abbas. Abbas’ first gift to his newlywed wife Safia is Nehru’s Discovery of India to make her read and come up with reasoned arguments to discuss and comprehend her view points. His radical thoughts about freedom, religion, leadership and independence led him towards a great struggle. His character suggests that not only the women but also the men equally need to be radical in their stance against age-old practices in the
name of Allah. One should question the integrity of literate and Muslim liberal men in the domain of women empowerment and their emancipation. The so-called authoritative voice containing fundamental approach towards women must be shunned by the men in accordance with women. Arguably, the liberal Muslim men need to interrogate the ruling religious fundamentalism amongst their societies. The very essence of Abbas’ character excels when he practices equality and encourages Safia for all progressive steps whether it is suggesting her to reject ‘burqa’ by saying: “I have always believed that every individual is entitled to freedom. Given the choice and a little support, no woman in her right mind would want to wear the burqa … How do you hope to survive in it without recognition? Come down. You are a woman and that is nothing to be ashamed of.” (7); or sending her to Allahabad University for further education or learning English language or driving. The iconoclast of the novel, Abbas questions the relevance of Islamic systems in pre-independent India and Muslims for their conformist attitudes on and off rigorously. The more the Abbas-es in Muslim societies, the more equality can see the light of day. One of the monologues by him is interrogating the clergy:

Which community? Oh, you mean the Muslim community, or is it Shia or Syed? I have never seen them function as a community except during the Moharram when they gather round large tazias,…Where is the community? Do you ever meet to help each other? Do you sit and plan what is good for the Muslims of India? Do you ever think that the world has just emerged from a world war and that a new world is in the process of being born, a world with a new system, a new policy? Have you ever tried to think what role the Muslims would play in shaping this new world?...Have you tried to make people understand what partition would mean? Have you made the Muslims think, even selfishly, what harm they would come to, if this madness becomes a reality? No. You continue to live in the 16th century when Muslims were the rulers. We are not the rulers anymore, but this is our country. Think of it as a whole. … People listen to you. Do something about things that matter. Don’t make petty incidents major issues Imam Sahib. It is a dangerous habit. (73-74)
His angst against the fanaticism and fundamentalism is prevailing among the Muslim leaders and clergies exhibits his very personality in the novel. He strictly believes that the stagnant nature of religion harms the growth and progress of its people.

On the other hand, Safia raises questions as and when her eager soul ventures into something unknown to her. As a keen observer, her husband’s actions, precisions and revolutionary movements affect her psyche and turn her towards rationality. Islam also propagates rationality and suspends blind slavery to any idea or command. It encourages the followers to read, understand, question and then believe what is documented for their betterment. Abbas as a communist leader is often arrested and put behind bars for his fierce writing and reformist ideas hence he provokes Safia to get further education to carry forward his intellectual legacy for social reforms. Dr Zahida, a female communist, co-author with Abbas, a doctor by profession; stands out to be a moral guide to her in Abbas’ absence – teaches her English language, smoking in front of all, encouraging to lead a life without male support by saying “Why do you want a man tagging along? Nature has given the female more courage and strength. When are we going to start using it?” (36), driving and most importantly standing for one’s self. Dr. Zahida provides an example of ‘womanism’ provided by Alice Walker in a distinct way. Safia leaves Lucknow with her father in law Sir Jafri with many reasons – Abbas’s imprisonment, Sir Jafri’s affair with Sylvia, Begum Jafri’s tantrums all day long and university education at Allahabad University. Her efforts to learn to drive seems an un-Islamic task to Begum Jafri, who on her visit to Allahabad gets offended by her. Is driving anti-Islamic for women? What are the insinuations behind the same? Saudi Arabia the only country in the world still bans women for driving declaring it as an anti-Islamic thing. The same view pertains in most of the Muslim families in other countries too, but they are not so hardcore fanatic to make policies to ban female drivers. The general reasons provided by religious authorities are (a) driving a car involves uncovering the face, (b) driving a car may lead women to go out of the house more often, (c) driving a car may lead women to have interaction with “unrelated men and women” i.e., non-mahram males and females, for example at traffic accidents, (d) women driving cars may lead to overcrowding the streets and many young men may be deprived of the opportunity to drive, and finally (e) driving would be the first step in an erosion of traditional values, such as gender segregation. It would be necessary to do rethinking over “overall re-evaluation of the
role of women in Saudi Arabia”. (Peter 248) Though it is not supported by the Quran, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in an interview in 2005 anticipates that society as a whole would soon accept the women are driving and “the day will come when women will drive”. (Walters “King Abdullah Interview”) But yet the situation has not changed a bit. Leaving behind extremist stance internationally and contemplating Muslim families in India, the mental makeup in religiously rigid families does not support the idea of women’s mobility. Arguably, Muslims should be re-taught the Islamic history with different lenses wherein the ‘Battle of Camels’ was fought by Bibi Aisha, Prophet’s beloved wife with all arms riding a camel. “The Islamic historians called this confrontation “The Battle of the Camel”, referring to the camel ridden by Aisha, thereby avoiding linking in the memory of little Muslim girls the name of a woman with the name of a battle.” (Mernissi 5) The power corrupt patriarchal documentation cannot deny the fact that driving is not un-Islamic. Mernissi has tried to justify the riding on camel and fighting in a battle by Aisha as an important incident with the contextual necessity of that time which was later documented very much negatively. Mernissi’s cross – references provide a picture of exaggerated patriarchal influence on interpretations and suggestions over the whole issue of ‘Battle of Camel’. If in year 36 of Hejira (AD 658) a woman could ride a camel to fight in a battle, questionably, the ever-growing fanaticism in Islam should be seen as the subjugation of women in a myopic way.

Safia and Abbas together strive to stand for justice and women’s emancipation. Various short episodes in the novel explain how this couple together envisages just and women-friendly societies. There is an incident when Nigar, a female student to Safia from the school comes to her and begs to help her. An old man who sent a proposal for his son changes his mind and offers his self for marriage. This old man had two wives, who died during childbirth, then he married the third time, but the third wife turned out barren and so he now wanted to get Nigar as a young wife to bear more children. He already has five children; two elder daughters are married, and the eldest son is a student at the Lucknow University. The family agrees and the girl who loves his son Zain is put in a fix. Abbas and Safia together encourage her to stop being pitied and act according to their plan of actions. Abbas gives assurance to Nigar that:
Listen Nigar and listen well, because there shall be no chance of my repeating it and you will have to act on what you can remember of it. Islam gives women some rights. Those rights are few and there is a lot of noise about having granted them. Still, they are there and let us thank the lawmakers for small mercies. Make use of these rights and we shall take care of the rest. (59)

Both, Abbas and Safia join the marriage ceremony and, as planned, both secure their positions – Abbas near the Maulvi and Safia near Nigar. As decided, Nigar refuses to accept the proposal at the time of Nikah. Her mother slaps her on her cheek and then Safia intervenes and declares that Nigar does not want to marry this man before a huge crowd of baraati, relatives and friends. When Maulvi suggests womenfolk to persuade Nigar, Abbas asserts with the Holy Book in his hands:

“What do you mean? No persuasion, threat or blackmail can be used to make a girl marry against her wishes. The Holy Book is very clear on this point. Let me show it to you.” Abbas held out his hand for the Quran and Maulvi Sahib on to it for his dear life. “No, no. No need for that. But why stop a union? The girl would be happy. After all the man is rich and…” “Are you out of your mind? You want to rewrite the Quran? You want to interfere with His dictates, want to be a Prophet yourself?” “God forbid!” Maulvi Sahib was visibly trembling. “Then stop a marriage where the Quran is being insulted. Your work is to see that the word of Allah is maintained and that no distortions are committed in the Holy Scriptures.” (62)

Abbas uses the same technique as any religious authority uses – the Quran and its words. Safia and Abbas both know how to put the fundamentalists in the unanswerable situations. Both in a harmonious way deal with ups and downs of their lives together. More than husband and wife, they act as closest friends, companions and more specifically comrades who fight for a cause – emancipation of Muslim women in India. In girls’ school, Safia experiments with different teaching styles and the girls feel very thankful to Safia. For an event at school, Safia had to reach on time but could not due to her broken slipper and railway crossing delays. She took a fight with a Maulvi, who insults her by calling her a slut teaching un-Islamic lessons to
Muslim girls in the school. Safia as a fearless and courageous woman slaps him which obviously invites a big battle. That Maulvi with Imam Sahib come to Zeenat Begum at their home to complain about Safia. She is frightened to see them and that Maulvi, who describes the incident and says that “that is not all, she has been seen wearing the sacred green and white check scarf in her foot” which was given to her by a stranger to protect her foot as her slipper was broken. (72) The illogical agitation behind anything which can be related to Islam and its insult seems fundamentalists’ hobby to the couple now. Abbas on behalf of Safia takes up the call and sarcastically scolds her by saying that

“I have asked you so many times, taught you, cajoled you and even given you at least a dozen demonstrations, but you refuse to listen. How many times I have to tell you not to slap a man? Always punch him in the nose and never once. A punch must be followed by three or four quick hard punches. A slap does nothing while a punch on the nose, even from a light hand, would at least numb him for a few seconds.”… The Imam stood up and the congregation followed. “You shall either divorce or be ostracized from the community.” (73)

The arguments between the Imam and Abbas lead towards almost declaring a fatwa. However, Mujataba Sahib publicly makes a speech and clarifies the incident and how Safia had to slap the Maulvi: “Can any woman from a genteel family tolerate being called ‘a slut’? Yes, I have witnesses to prove that. Still, I shall make her apologize but only after the maulvi in question has apologized to her and has been removed from his position in the Masjid for carrying on this un-Islamic activity.” (76)

Not only outsiders but also the family members and especially Zeenat Begum who carries fundamental attitude towards everything is taken to task and protested against by this couple. A slave girl Ladli is impregnated by Syed Wali who is husband to Abbas’ sister. To save the honour of that slave girl and to give the child a father’s name, Abbas and Safia stand together as a shield. Zeenat Begum beats Ladli and forces her to abort the baby at midnight. Beaten Ladli seeks help and refuge from Safia. On helping her, Zeenat Begum disconnects electricity from outhouse where Safia and Abbas live. Together, they help Ladli by convincing Wali bhai for marriage with her. Syed Wali says: “But to have a wife from that class. Disgusting!” On this,
Abbas furiously scolds him by saying that “you had no problems sleeping with that class.” (85) The hypocrisy of elite class men is shown here who can rape, have sex with a lower class woman but cannot accept their sins publicly nor honor their illicit children their names and shares. However, they manage to convince Wali bhai for marrying this slave girl. But with their surprise, after the Nikaah, Ladli is asked to reveal the name of the responsible person by the Imam whose child she is carrying, and she distrusts Safia and Abbas by saying that the baby is by Kasim, a male servant. The couple is totally taken aback on seeing that Ladli accepts the amount of mahr a thousand rupees after the talaq quickly and soon leaves the place. Shattered Abbas who fought hard to save Ladli’s honour is ditched by this Bengali servant. Through her, Abbas “wanted to change so much” and “help Muslim women get some rights, wanted that the men should stop treating them as possessions for pleasure”. (87) The couple can understand that everything can be purchased with money even a woman’s honour, dignity and her womb too. They both are disheartened at the whole event.

It is understandable that when Abbas comes to know his mother Zeenat Begum buys female slaves, he quickly decides to leave that house and shifts in “the outhouse” as he cannot “swallow this degradation of humanity”. (16) It is inexplicable to see pre-independent Indian Muslim rich lady Zeenat Begum who calculates and congrats herself on the bargain. “Three girls were bought that day. Two for Rs 70 each and the third, because she was fair, with long black hair and almond-shaped eyes, came for Rs 100. The debate over the price had been long drawn, beginning at 400 for three and slowly working itself down to 240.” (18) It is Begum Zeenat’s fanatic approach towards religion which triggers more than any male member of the Jafri family. Many incidents attest her fanaticism and hypocrisy which directly affect other characters and make their lives hell. She is the one who calls Imam of Juma Masjid when Abbas was leaving India for studying abroad. The meeting is hilarious as well as marking religious extremism.

When his turn had come for going to England, Zeenat Begum had in her anxiety called the Imam of Juma Masjid, who had proclaimed that is Abbas swore to something, he would stick to it. Pleased with this public acceptance of the value of her son’s word, she had called Abbas, and in Imam Sahib’s presence, asked him to swear not to touch pork, wine or women in England. Abbas had very innocently asked, “Then
why go to England?” The Imam had left proclaiming that Abbas was Satan in an excellent disguise. (13)

Zeenat Begum is rigid and stringent about religious rules and commands. She simply rejects the suggestion to bring Safia together with her while meeting Abbas in the Jail. She exclaims “How can I? She doesn’t wear a veil, the shameless hussy.” (28) To counter-argue, her husband Safrdar Jafri uses the same technique as hers by using Islam as a weapon. He argues: “Well, I am switching over to your side now. Like a devout Muslim, I think a woman should blindly do what her husband says. You have two alternatives now. Either switch to my earlier view so that we can maintain the status quo of having different opinions about everything under the sun, or stick to your earlier beliefs and agree with me now.” (28) She remains frustrated with her husband, son and now this daughter in law, Safia for their liberal and progressive views. All the time she is seen in conflict with these characters. As a villainess, she tries to dominate others with utmost fundamentalism and hypocrisy. It is speculated that she stoops too low on knowing that Safrdar Jafri has an affair with a white lady Sylvia who is carrying a child with him, and thus she hires people to get them murdered. Safrdar Jafri is badly beaten and thus gets paralyzed. After him, she rules the house and wealth with her authoritativeness. Even at the time of Abbas’ assassination, she cries but declares immediately: “The body has to be buried. No. Not the family graveyard. The Imam would never allow it. A corner of the general graveyard would do. Everything has to be managed before daylight, as per the dictates of the Holy Book. See that a widow is here to break her bangles and dress her in white.” Furthermore, as the sole authority of the house and wealth, she declares that “She [Sitara] is nobody to me. Neither is that woman [Safia]. My son is dead, and the link between her and my family is broken. These two are neither a part of the family nor do they have any right to the property. Once the funeral is over, get this place vacant.” (147)

**Safia’s Solitary Journey**

The novel becomes a saga of Safia’s suffering along with Abbas and his cause. After Abbas’ assassination, solitary Safia begins a new journey with a two-month-old daughter Sitara. Paralysed father-in-law, Safrdar Jafri is helpless who can’t utter a single word in Safia’s defense and at the same time no court and no lawyer come to give justice to her. The only ray of hope for Safia is to leave Lucknow as her
life along with Sitara is under threat. Dr. Zahida and Katayanji, a confidante and Sanskrit scholar advise her to relocate in Delhi with a recommendation to work under Mrs Govind Ram in a theatre group. Half of the novel from the seventeenth chapter onwards depicts Safia’s another longer journey full of struggles, failures, victories, pain, love and joy all together. Safia works for the Kendra, manages artists and their performances, learns from the masterji and slowly indulges into national and internationally funded reformist performances on the stage. Soon Mrs. Govind Ram becomes Amrita to her, and the bond between them grows stronger day by day, year by year. Through Govind Ram and Amrita, Zaheer puts an example of Hindu couple and Hindu Marriage Act, which is way more supportive and beneficial to Hindu women in contrast to Muslim Personal Law and injustice to Muslim women in the same country. Pervert, selfish and brutal Govind Ram is a threat to Amrita and their only child 11-year old daughter Geetika who “is a total spastic” like “a very large doll…., the limp doll” with her “lolling head and dribbling mouth” (185). Amrita’s sub-plot is a strong episode in the novel to bring about a contrast as well as a comparison between Hindu and Muslim women in India. Many characters are conjured up with amazingly sharp descriptions wherein feminist perspectives are dramatically propagated and exhibited.

Amrita is ashamed of the crippled child Geetika and does not carry her anywhere out of the house. But Safia encourages her by saying that “Stop pitying her Amrita and stop pitying yourself. She is a beautiful child who loves you to distraction. Don’t hide her. Be proud of her and let everyone know that she is yours.” (185) Safia-Amrita pair provides a wonderful example of harmonious Indian women who live together, support the helpless and distorted ones irrespective of their religion and backgrounds in independent India. Many of the chapters deal with the Kendra and its activities along with artists, grants, stage performances, political and social debates, etc. Safia does not re-marry and becomes much stauncher in her approach towards religion and menfolk. Amrita bitterly tells her that

“Safia, you have been without a man for too long. You have to a large extent got rid of the influence a man has over a woman. You have even forgotten that he has one. Taking a few guidelines from the few years that you spent with Abbas, you have developed and formed your own character. It is you, the complete you. None of us is really ‘Me’. We
are all reflections of our husband’s personality in a much abused and cracked mirror. No matter how much we might like to be our own self, we can only reflect what is around us.” (243)

Safia’s character, thus, is archetypical and is in contrast with other women around her. Amrita can be seen as a paradox who hates her husband but does not leave him for few specific reasons. Govind Ram himself wants to get rid of their daughter and eventually Amrita as well. Zaheer points out that not only Muslim women but also Hindu upper-class women too suffer in the hands of male chauvinists in India. But at the same time, she highlights the role of Indian government and laws providing security to married Hindu women who can practice their right to reject the divorce proposal and ask alimony after divorce. After disputes among artists and Amrita, Safia leaves the Kendra to work with different organizations to promote arts, theatrical activities and political leftism. Amrita, on the other hand, is totally sidelined by her husband who disintegrates the Kendra and behaves brutally with her. Geetika, now almost 36 years old is killed by him when she cannot tolerate seeing her mother beaten by him. After knowing about Geetika’s death, Safia again visits Amrita after many years and revitalizes their old bond of friendship. The acute point of contrast between Hindu and Muslim divorce system is explained in the novel.

It took a long drawn battle of three and a half years to get the possession of the two lower floors of what was once the Gandharva Kendra. Three favourable judgments from the courts before Govind Ram realized the futility of fighting on. The fact that Amrita insisted that she did not want a divorce worked in her favour. She came out, a pious Hindu woman, honouring the seven commitments to her lord and master. All she wanted was a separation and a settlement of property. (221)

Muslim women, on the other hand, do not possess the right to reject divorce from their husbands and from their own they cannot even declare divorce except ‘Khula’. “If a man pronounced talaq the woman just had to accept it; she had not right to question or ask the reason for the divorce.” (Zaheer “Denied by” 32) Furthermore, it is evidently remarked that:
The Hadith gives an incident supporting this [Khula]: In the time of the Prophet, the wife of Thabit-ibne-Qais came to the Prophet and asked him to intervene on her behalf to obtain khula. The Prophet inquired about the terms and conditions of the nikah. He was told that an orchard had been given to her as the dower or meher at the time of marriage. The prophet then asked her if she was willing to give back to her husband the orchard he had given her. The woman accepted this demand and got Khula. (Zaheer “Denied by” 33)

As a matter of fact, as it can be easily understood that Islam has had easy ways and solutions for getting married and getting separated as well. But the practice of Khula cannot be done without the intervention of authority. Wadud in *Quran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* in 1999 clarifies: “In the Quran the advantage men have is that of being individually able to pronounce divorce against their wives without arbitration or assistance. Divorce is granted to a woman, on the other hand, only after intervention of authority (for example, a judge)” (68)

Safia, having known this above truth, is happy for Amrita’s freedom on the surface but deep inside as the novel explains, she realizes a bitter truth:

Safia blessed Amrita for fighting for her freedom, even though in some corner of her heart she had to admit the truth. More than Amrita’s will, it had been the Hindu Married Act with its various amendments and updating that had made its women supportive, providing the Hindu women the right to maintenance, property and a legitimacy to live with dignity. She wondered when Amrita’s Muslim counterpart would enjoy the same benefits under a unified civil code. (224)

Despite injustice at her part, Safia becomes a symbol of independent and strong-headed woman. She carries her husband’s vision of a just society for all and stands against the chauvinist social stigmas. Her daughter Sitara, on the other hand, is seen as an antithesis to her as she remains dependable on her husband Wasim Zakaria, a graduate in Social Sciences from London on a Commonwealth scholarship. A typical Muslim boy convinces Sitara to address Safia with Ammi instead of Ma as Ammi is “the Muslim way”. (214) Sophisticated, devoutly religious, miser and patriarchal Wasim harass Sitara for her not being able to conceive. After many scandals
internationally, he makes every effort to use Safia’s property, belongings and possessions. When Safia intervenes and suggests her daughter to stand for herself, he fights with heart patient Safia:

“You are plotting with Sitara how she can be the owner of my property, how she can throw me into the streets. … Have you forgotten that it was I who took pity on you and your daughter? I married her even though you were an outcaste of the community. … I believed that I was doing a service to Islam by bringing a lost soul back to the true faith. … What have I got in return? Her barrenness! I have no child to carry on my name. It is my Islamic duty to propagate. I can marry again. I need not even divorce her.” (240-241)

In short, Safia is opposed and is seen divergent from each character who is fanatic. Sitara, well-educated daughter even, does not support her mother in her endeavors.

However, Zaheer time and again reminds Safia the favourite lines of Tagore which Abbas used to hum very often “Jodi tor dak sune keu na ashey, tobe ekla chalo re” (If they answer not to thy call, walk alone) (69) With Abbas’ vision and her own independent nature, throughout the novel, she always remains positively active to raise her voice against any sort of injustice and patriarchy even before Jawaharlal Nehru as the first Prime Minister and a character in the novel who feels embarrassed to see Safia after many years on the stage in Delhi and asks her to meet him personally. On meeting, he defends the government’s role by saying: “We had no alternative…. It was their [Marxist Party members’] duty to stand by him [Abbas]” (180) And as truthful as always Safia outbursts: “Everyone was passing the baggage called duty. But everyone knew that what The Flames said was right. Those flames shall flare up again, from another pen, from another hearth, because injustice cannot be given the garb of religion. Providing each sect its kind of bias cannot be the definition of secularism. Just as winning the elections on male appeasement can never bring about true democracy.” (181)

**Shah Bano Controversy**

For Muslim women, the Shah Bano case in India created a welter of chaos among Muslims and non-Muslims alike and questioned the sacrosanct nature of the Indian
Noor Zaheer, as a junior reporter in 1986, was exploring the “possibilities of developing expertise in a well-defined area” where to her “law and its various interpretations seemed a good option”. She joined Danial Latifi, the lawyer who represented Shah Bano when she appealed to the Supreme Court in 1986. Shah Bano, a Muslim divorcee from Indore, demanded maintenance from her husband after more than three decades of divorce which was granted to her by the lower court and the high court. The husband appealed to the Supreme Court on the request that the Muslim Shariat does not make any provision for alimony or maintenance. The apex court upheld the decision of the high court, leading to an uproar in the Muslim community. The decision of the Supreme Court was overruled by the Parliament. The Rajiv Gandhi government, for the Muslim vote bank, under the pressure of Muslim clergies, did not give a helping hand to Muslim women with Shariat Law’s dominating insertion. It is arguably believed that if this case could have received justice then, today Muslim women could have far better lives to live. While tracing the history of Islamic Feminism in India, Sylvia Vatuk highlights:

The most immediate roots of this movement can be traced to the 1985 Supreme Court judgment in the Shah Bano case and the subsequent successful campaign by the Muslim clerical leadership to enact the MWA [Muslim Women Act 1986], making divorced Muslim women no longer eligible to sue their husbands for maintenance under the relevant provision of the Criminal Procedure Code. But the broader context of its emergence lies in the process of ‘fragmentation of religious authority’ in the contemporary globalizing Muslim world that is related to such developments as the spread of mass education, the coming of new forms of media and transport and the growth of a mobile, worldwide labour market. (514)

The event and its aftermath inspired not only the reformists and lawmakers but also the writers and fictionists. The fiction My God is a Woman draws the attention of readers towards the ill-fate of Shah Bano and those who supported the cause. How religious fundamentalists influence the court’s judgment and how the government bent down in front of the chauvinist agenda of fundamentalists – all was described here with the very keen description. Safia, being a strong opposition to religious extremism, is seen as a supporter of the cause. Shah Bano case is infused with the
actual main story of Safia and Abbas tactfully. As a sub-plot and important historical moment, it affects the main plot and the characters. In her old and mature age, Safia devotes her remaining life to women’s emancipation and artist struggles. Chapter Twenty-Eight of the novel begins:

The world was watching. The administration was tense. There was every possibility of flash communal riots. … It was going to be a supreme verdict; one that would change the pattern of sociology, that would prove to the world it was on its way to redefining laws and making them human friendly…. The fundamentalist world was sure that no one would dare to touch the basic fundamentals… The liberals and the progressives hoped for a change and prayed that someone else would initiate it. The common people prayed that the storm would blow over without breaking on their heads. … It took another half an hour for the verdict to come. It gave a 76-year old woman a right to live and die with dignity. It took just about the same time for the Muslim world to be up in arms, claiming that it had every right to treat its women like chattel and questioned the authority of the Supreme Court. Who was the Supreme Court after all to order them to be more human towards their womenfolk? (231-232)

Sitara, as a young adult and married daughter, feels worried about mother Safia as the situation was being worsened. Through third person narration, the case is clearly mentioned with all nitty-gritty in an interrogating and furious tone. The novel documents the outbursts and rants in the same way as the real ones: “The judgement is against the Shariat, the Muslim law!” “It is an insult to the minority community!” “It is communal. It is calculated attempt to merge the Muslims into the Hindu majority!” “It is against secularism!” “It is direct interference in the practice of one’s faith!” “It goes against the Constitution!” and “The Muslims would rather die than allow these changes in their Shariat!” (232-233) Zaheer uses the exact details of the case from the book Shah Bano by Janak Raj Jai which is “perhaps the most precise documentation of the proceeding of the case and its aftermath” (Preface) and thus tries to put reality in a novel for the fiction reading audience. The role and reactions of the then Prime Minister, members of the Parliament, Congress party, communist parties, opposition parties, common people, fundamentalists and religious leaders is
thus included to sketch an unbiased picture. Zaheer quotes ZR Ansari’s trump card which shut down the Muslim supporters’ mouths at once: “If this was to become the state of affairs in this country, if this interference and these bids to make changes were not stopped, the Muslim men would rather die before seeing the Shariat, the God’s word and instructions, tempered with” (235). Are ‘God’s words and instructions’ this much authoritative that they don’t recognise the needs and helplessness of individuals? For the same, what Islamic feminist Wadud in suggests is rationally correct and suggestive: “It should not be hard to understand that the purpose of the historical construction of Islamic law or Shariah was to fulfil that end: to construct a system that reflects the “justification and appraisal of moral judgment as well as the discrimination between right and wrong actions or decisions.”” (“Inside the Gender Jihad” 38) Moreover, ethical and moral theorising consists of two important implications which are:

First, understanding what is ethical is relative to context. Therefore, second, it affects the ways we resolve new issues outside the parameters available through literal application of rules or codes established in the early development of Shariah and Islamic thought. Again, these were human-made relative to the existing civil and moral contexts, perhaps based on the Quran and the Sunnah, which Muslims agree embody the original core of the Islamic ethical spirit. Not surprisingly, women did not participate in the historical development of Islamic ethics. Theories were always based upon the presumption of the male Muslim as the normative human being. (38-39)

Thus, these ‘human-made’ Shariah laws with civil and moral contexts cannot be authoritative and final verdict to every new problem in different culture and circumstances. Zaheer questions the authority that how come such stringent patriarchal rules dictate every situation and every circumstance. Her sarcasm on government’s impotence and self-centred approach on this issue is remarkable. She concludes the chapter in a calm manner by a serene comparison between Rajiv Gandhi and his mother Indira Gandhi by saying that:

Eleven years back, his mother had retained her prime ministership by making willy-nilly of the judiciary. She claimed that she knew best
because she and the majority of her parliamentarians were the people’s representatives and thus had the supreme power to guide this country. Eleven years later, her pilot son navigated this country through the troubled seas of gender war to the calm waters of male superiority and female complacency. (236)

Remarkably, the novel embodies political, religious, cultural and social implications attached to the case. More than this, through Safia, feelings of individuals associated with the case are also wonderfully sketched to indicate that those who could not fight against injustice in their circumstances, stood for Shah Bano’s cause and struggle. Safia tries hard to persuade her daughter Sitara to accompany her to Indore; to meet and support Shah Bano after the unfavourable verdict to her. And surprisingly, her daughter refuses by saying that it is futile for individuals to go and show their support to her and for the same, she requires her husband Wasim’s permission. Moreover, she questions Safia if she is trying to revive her battle through Shah Bano. Safia, on the other hand, knows that her battle has long been lost, but she is very vocal about the falsity of religious practices and argues:

Law and religion are two different things. How can they be clubbed together? The demands on law keep changing as society keeps churning itself. According to Islam, all thieves should have their hands cut, all rapists lose their noses and you should be paying one-third of your income as taxes. No Muslim thief or rapist is punished that way and Muslims are quite happy to divide their income into various allowances so that they do not have to pay any zakat. Why then should be personal law remain static? Why should social and personal law be compartmentalized? Because men want to maintain their superior status in their homes. They know that a family is the smallest unit of the society, and if they manage to keep hold on that, then they can control the society as well. (239)

The sheer comparison between Islamic rules for theft, rape and tax payment, etc. and rules for marriage, divorce, and property, etc. shows how diplomatic and patriarchal is the execution of different laws. Failed in her persuading Sitara, Safia approaches Amrita to accompany her and support Shah Bano. Tragically, Safia is silenced when
Amrita outright rejects that it’s not her cause by saying: “You cannot deny that I am a Hindu. How can you expect that I shall identify with this Muslim woman’s battle for equal rights? I don’t ever know what she is fighting for.” (243) The problem is not with what one’s religion is but the problem here is that people are not bothered to know even the cause of others’ struggles. Zaheer points out that the fight a Muslim old lady had picked up was not only hers; the struggle is symbolic of raising voice against religious patriarchy and thus through Safia, Zaheer interrogates Amrita philosophically:

Don’t you think there is only one divide on earth, mine and thine – my property, my beliefs, your religion, your commitments? Into these two halves fall everything – family, land, money, faith and even ideologies. Today you are thinking that all this does not concern you, but soon, very soon, you shall see the two halves are two concentric circles and the area where they overlap shares the same light and darkness, the same fates and the same destiny. That religion is inhabited by the woman. Don’t think this will stop here. Very soon, the Sati shall be revived. Some woman somewhere shall be burnt like rotten wood. People will say that she was a Hindu, just as they say about Shah Bano that she is a Muslim. How wrong they would be. She would really be like all of us, just a woman. (246)

Being ‘just a woman’ is enough for Safia to help and support another woman as she has done for Amrita as well and as Amrita has done for Safia too. Without anyone, heart patient Safia leaves Delhi and reaches Indore, but her health deteriorates on reaching the station. A Sikh boy informs her: “Shah Bano is not allowed to meet anyone. She has given the affidavit asking the Supreme Court to review its decision, or else she shall be withdrawing her case. She is never left alone. You shall have to wear a burqa and pose as a strict Muslim, who has come to reform her.” (249) Safia meets a station master who provides her details of Shah Bano as being a distant cousin to him and explains his meeting with her. He describes that Shah Bano humorously offered him a cup of tea saying that “Please do. I am a rich woman, receiving Rs 179.20 as maintenance.” (251) and with the same she burst out laughing. The station master cries his heart out by saying that he could not understand the reason for her laughter. He questions Shah Bano’s sarcastic laughter to be “At
herself? At the world that took cognizance of her after so many years? At me, who met her but rarely and had now come to view her as something of a rarity, a museum piece? The courage of the destitute to laugh at them.” (251) Zaheer asserts that “good to smile, better to laugh” (250) as “humour is the essence of life.” (252) Furthermore, he provides Safia a shabby place and bedding to rest as she was going through pain in her heart. The very tragic event in the novel sluggishly approaches when she retires to bed after the station master leaves with the hope to meet Shah Bano the next day. Her mind with lots of ideas and thoughts orders her to write down everything. In the last thirty-third chapter, when Amrita and Sitara come to search Safia here after many difficulties to find her; the same station master reveals that Safia died on that same night and as he is a Muslim he could claim her body saying she was his distant cousin. The tragic death of Safia all alone in a shabby station master’s room with her last thoughts in a notebook is brilliantly described as a catastrophe in the novel. The paradox is subtle to suggest that she fights for her rights as a human being before being a woman; she fights for her husband’s cause for equality for all; she fights for theatre artists and Amrita’s rights; she fights for her daughter Sitara’s well-being throughout her life – but what she meets up with in the end is loneliness and destitution with her desire to support Shah Bano’s fight for justice. Besides, the station master informs Sitara and Amrita that her body was rotten in a non-working air-conditioned mortuary, and her burial was a quite one with only three people – the maulvi, the gravedigger and him. Moreover, he describes the incident with appropriate marks:

I burnt a solitary oil lamp on the grave, but as I turned back after a few steps to see the grave for the last time, I saw a ragamuffin boy run to it and snatching it quickly, take it to his mother who was standing behind a tree. I wanted to go back and scold them but the way the mother was stroking the boy’s head and the joy on their faces made me stop. It would probably go into their evening meal and give it some flavor, or maybe their tumble down hut would have a light after many days. I came away with the nagging feeling of guilt that I had somehow not done enough for your mother. However, after reading this copybook, I know that I did the right thing. It is the living who matter. The dead are trains gone by. (265-266)
Her tragic exit leaves some prolific writing on pages, which ends the novel in the interlude. ‘Interlude’ incorporates what happens with Amrita and Sitara’s lives after Safia’s death and the last writing by Safia in her Journal. Philosophical and rational inquiry in religion, human life and law has been written in the last few pages under the section “From Safia’s Journal”. Using Safia’s character as a spokesperson, Zaheer says that “freedom is faith, just as equality, peace or friendship” and “like all faiths, it has to redefine continuously and reinvent itself to survive” (268). She talks about the history of Europe, the importance of individuals, politics behind Arab world, Shariat law and its historical implications, Shah Bano’s struggle, Indian patriarchal government and injustice to Muslim women and eventually and most precisely the fight between fundamentalists and liberals. She quotes the Quran, which answers the question of maintenance in the case of divorced women: “WA LIL MOTALLAQATAY MATA UN BIL MAAROOFAY HAQQAN ALAL MUTTAQUEENA” “KAZALEKA YUBAIYYANULLAHO LAKUM AYATEHEE LA ALLAKUM TAQELOON” which in translation says: “for divorced women maintenance/provision is a reasonable scale. This is the duty on the righteous…Thus doth God make his sign to you, so that you may understand.” (272-273) She outright condemns the Muslim fundamentalists whose ill-intentions made the entire case a mockery of an destitute old woman. She asserts that when Shah Bano rejected the judgment of the Supreme Court and withdrew her petition, “the government was too busy bringing in the Bill for the Protection of Muslim Women” (273). Moreover, she is more critical in her approach and directly writes:

A Bill that not only quashed the Supreme Court’s decision in Shah Bano’s case, it thrust the responsibility of looking after a divorcee on her family, her siblings, her well-to-do children and if all of them are not forthcoming, then the on the Wakf Board. In other words, it gives the divorced woman a choice between prostitution if she is young and beggary if she is old. Shah Bano was neither a political leader nor a film star. Her appeal for protection went unanswered. (273)

With such ‘unanswered’ appeals and questions, Zaheer asserts on a fact that the fight for freedom and justice should not be ceased at any point in time. The crucial issue is that of awareness and courage among Muslim women themselves first and then rest of the world has to stand with the righteous ones. Her emphasis is laid upon
government’s role as a saviour in Muslim women’s emancipation in democratic India, religion’s role as a just way of the spiritual relationship between God and followers, and an individual’s role as a strong medium to stand for justice and freedom from bigotry. Safia’s helplessness is justified in her poem in the journal written before her last breaths. It reads:

How am I to write immortal works when I am not free?
How am I to answer when I am not asked?
Why should I waste time in writing verses?
If time itself loses those verses.
I write in a durable kind of language.
It shall be long until they are implemented.
To achieve the fundamentals, great changes are needed.
Little changes are the enemies of great changes.

My thoughts have enemies. Therefore, I must be free. (268)

In conclusion, the situation of Muslim women in India is seen as a minority within a minority with muted and sidelined existence. Zaheer is not sure of the term as a discourse, during an interview on 21st July 2013 with the researcher, but for her, the idea of Islamic Feminism exists for believing women. She says:

“I don’t believe that any feminism is possible within the parameters of any religion. Fundamentally all religions are patriarchal or have become so over time. I suppose Islamic feminism would be a kind that asserts gender rights as sanctioned in Islam…. A large section of women do not wish to give up on their Islamic identity and hence to find some space for their expression promote the so called Islamic Feminism.” (Interview)

Indeed, the discourse is facilitating Muslim women with reinterpretations and deconstruction of prevailing meanings of Quran and Hadith to practice their religion in the paradigm of Islamic domain. India as a democratic country with multi-lingual and multi-cultural societies faces various issues, and justice for Muslim women is one of those issues to address with keen importance. Zaheer in her book Denied by Allah states that
No one has a problem with the Muslim way of worship, belief in the Prophet, Hajj, Ramzan, Namaz etc. But Muslims should have a problem with the way Islamic law is keeping half of the community away from the mainstream, deprived of what the Constitution guarantees, and which is a major hurdle in the development of the community. (Author’s Note)

It is imperative, thus, to view how, from the historical failure of the Shah Bano case to recent times, the scenario has changed using different mediums of propagation as well as protest. The voice of Muslim women in India has increased to point out that they exist. Vatuk is positive enough to register the subtle movements in India which show that Muslim women have been struggling to comprehend the holy texts on their own and create groups to propagate the hidden meanings behind them. She asserts that

Women are becoming increasingly prominent participants in this ‘new Muslim public sphere’. Female voices were previously virtually absent from scholarly religious discourse but today women increasingly feel in a position to develop and promote competing views on these subjects and are making themselves heard through a wide variety of media forms, both old and new. The Indian women’s rights activists … are part of this worldwide trend. (515-516)

If modern, technical and globally advanced India with international solidarity has shown up to be supportive and responsible to its population then Muslim women should also be heard, attended and provided with dignity and justice. The latest movement driven by Islamic feminism as a concept can be marked with almost around 70,000 Muslim women across 13 states that requested and urged for revival and reform in Muslim Personal Law to the current PM in 2015. (Agha “Muslim Women”) Religious circles should not be stringent to ban half of its population – the women – to be the voice of progressive Muslim community in India.
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