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### **Gender Issues**

**NAWAB FAIZUNNESA'S RUPJALAL.** By Fayeza S. Hasanat (trans). Leiden: E J Brill, 2009. Pp.224. ISBN: 9789004167803

Originally written in Bangla, Nawab Faizunnesa's (1834-1903) *Rupjalal* was published from Dhaka in 1876. Fayeza S. Hasanat's translation into English of the long-neglected semi-autobiographical allegory with an introduction and commentary has for the first time secured a place for Faizunnesa and for her work among the global readership. Previously, perhaps, the only notable mention Faizunnesa had in any significant research work was in Sonia Nishat Amin's *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* (Brill, 1996) that regards *Rupjalal*'s publication year as a significant marker in the history of Bengali Muslim women's literary practice, and the founding of Lady Brabourne College in 1939 as the culmination of Muslim women's education, since that was the first time it had government support during the colonial period.

Although Amin regards Faizunnesa as the first significant modern Muslim woman writer of former Bengal, it is still early to make a definitive assumption in this regard. New research is unearthing more and more past Bengali Muslim women writers. Now we know about Rahimunnessa of the eighteenth century whose poetry manuscript was first discovered in 1955, about Rahima and Zamirunnesa from Chittagong who the literary historians believe wrote in the first half of the nineteenth century. These three still remain largely unknown, and probably for this reason Taherunnesa is commonly considered the earliest Bengali Muslim woman writer whose 'Bamagoner Rachana' (Writing by Women) appeared in *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1856. However, since she is known to have appeared in the magazine just once along with her article and since we do not know much about her life except that she attended Boda School for Girls, early history of Bengali Muslim women's writing generally starts from Nawab Faizunnesa, about whose life and work information is available. The only Bengali Muslim woman litterateur who has so far received comparatively a greater amount of research attention is Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), and that with certain amount of disbelief and amazement as she is presumed to stand out alone without any significant predecessors or successors. Between Faizunnesa and Rokeya, there were few more: Latifunnesa, whose *Bangiya Musalman Lekhikader Prati* (To the Bengali Muslim Women Writers) was published in *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1897, and Azizunnesa, the first known Muslim woman to have been published in a Muslim-run magazine,



*Islam Pracharak*, as her poem 'Hamd Orthat Ishwar Stuti' (In Praise of God) was published in it in 1902.

Fayeza S. Hasanat begins her book by pointing to 'history's neglect of Nawab Faizunnesa'. (p.1) In fact, many more Indian Muslim women of the colonial period share this fate of being neglected or relatively under-studied. Muslim reformist movements in British India – feminist and otherwise – had mainly two pivotal centres: North India and Muslim Bengal. While the former stands on its own as an established intellectual tradition, the latter is still overwhelmed by the dominant representation of Hindu women writers by literary historians – both Muslims and Hindus. The fact that Faizunnesa's *Rupjalal* and Swarnakumari Devi's *Dipnirban* – the two earliest literary works by women writers in Bengal so far discovered along with Raschundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (My Life, 1875) – were published, one from Dhaka and the other from Calcutta, around the same time suggests that the history of Muslim women's literary production is as old as that of their Hindu counterparts'. However, representation of Muslim women writers has been marginal and inadequate.

Rokeya is the only Bengali Muslim woman writer who has been mentioned with some importance in Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars* (1998). Minault's omission of other Muslim women writers from former Bengal is pardonable as her work focuses on North Indian Muslim women's scholarship. But what seems odd is the fact that literary histories and anthologies that focus especially on Bengali women's writings mention the solitary Rokeya among a dozen Hindu women writers. It is now hoped that with Hasanat's work one more Bengali Muslim woman writer of the colonial period will have her legitimate place in literary history and that many more will follow.

An advocate of female education, a philanthropist and social worker, Faizunnesa was born in Comilla in what is now Bangladesh. She was married to a distant cousin and neighbouring zamindar, Muhammad Gazi, in 1860 as his second wife only to be separated after mothering two daughters. She became a zamindar after her mother's death in 1883 and became increasingly involved in social and charitable work, and thus in 1889 earned the honour of being the first woman Nawab of British India. She penned few other literary pieces such as *Sangeet Saar*, *Sangeet Lahari* and *Tattwa O Jatiya Sangeet*, and is renowned for her pioneering educational and charitable work and establishing of schools, madrasas and hospitals. However, *Rupjalal* has remained her most important work and attracted more research and critical attention.

*Rupjalal* is a story of prince Jalal and two heroines, Rupbanu and Hurbanu. It narrates Jalal's heroic and sexual exploits and his marriages to both the heroines. Hasanat reads *Rupjalal* "as a manifesto of Muslim women's sexual defiance and subordination in nineteenth century Bengal". (p.2) However, the text can also

be read as a counter narrative to the discourse of nineteenth-century Western literary orientalism that tends to emasculate Muslim men and represents Muslim women as always in the lookout for a gaze at Western Christian heroes only to sexually offer themselves to their supposed dream-lovers. Contrary to the image of emasculated Muslim man, Faizunnisa depicts an 'athletic and strong' Muslim hero of virility and valour who "grew so handsome at sixteen / That wherever he went, women were seen / Flocking around him; his manliness / Turned the meekest housewives into temptresses / And each of these women longed to be the one / To be loved by this handsome man!" (p.50)

Faizunnisa's educational and literary work belonged to the post-1857 era when Muslims in India started having the full thrust of colonial acrimony and were at the nadir of deprivation and discrimination. Faizunnisa realised that without modern education Muslims would never be able to compete with other indigenous communities and hence she established schools. John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune established the first women's college, Bethune College, in Calcutta in 1849; but access for Muslim girls was restricted, as it was set up exclusively for educating Hindu pupils. It took another ninety years for Muslim women's education to receive colonial government's support when in 1939 Lady Brabourne College was founded in Calcutta 'mainly-but not exclusively-for Muslim girls'. Faizunnisa embarked on establishing schools for women in that cultural context.

In order to buttress her way of reading the text, Hasanat overly relies on, and uncritically accepts and in many cases reproduces, Fatima Mernissi's stock notion of sexuality as described in *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1975) and *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (1996). Mernissi's argument, which Hasanat reproduces, is that in Islam woman is regarded as a root of *fitnah* (sedition) and as dangerous, and hence "needs to be in seclusion, under protective custody". (p.206) While Mernissi gave Imam Ghazālī's *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* a scriptural status and conclusively took his ideas as Islam's, Hasanat stretches it to Muslim Bengal and metaphorically relocated him there from Mernissi's Morocco, invariably for the same purpose, that is, to present a particular social context and cultural condition as the ahistorical Islamic norm. What is more, in Hasanat's case, fiction has been given, to use Margaret Ezell's words, "the force and authority of fact". While reading Hasanat's ideas of sexuality in Islam, readers may not find much novelty except for the change of cultural location – from Morocco to Muslim Bengal. To refute Hasanat's notion of sexuality in Islam, it may suffice to quote what Katherine Bullock argues while counteracting Mernissi's widely-circulated ideas: "It is [Moroccan] cultural views that Mernissi is attacking and analyzing in her works. The problem is ... Mernissi is conflating



what she finds in Morocco with normative Islam". Bullock adds, "Mernissi is not wrong to be critical of an Islamic scholar [Imām Ghazālī]; she is wrong to misread him and then to equate his single voice with Islam in its entirety" (*Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002, pp.152 & 167).

Hasanat's excessive dependence on Mernissi and the like has an explanation: her inadequate knowledge about Islam. Using borrowed references from Mernissi and from few other not-so-reliable writers, Hasanat tries to make sweeping statements about Islam, and that apparently without consulting fully the primary sources, the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*. Her poor understanding of Islam has been evident in a number of places in the book (for example pages 7, 22, 41, 50 and 187, to mention only a few instances).

Hasanat's treatment of Muslim society as opposed to Hindu society in colonial Bengal with regard to the status of women may also not stand up to academic scrutiny. She claims: "Muslim society's treatment of the female body was totally different from that of an orthodox Hindu or a liberal Brahmo society". (p.2) She attempts to depict a favourable picture of the Hindu community as opposed to the Muslim community, stating: 'While "the [Hindu] nationalist male" thought of his own wife/sister/daughter as "normal" precisely because she was no more a "sex object," a Muslim male reformer considered his wife/sister/daughter always as a sex object'. (p.13) While it is true that there were a number of Hindu reformists who did not regard women simply as sex objects, it is equally true that Muslim society was not bereft of such reformist intellectuals. And it was those men who provided the support structure for Faizunnesa and Rokeya to launch their feminist activism. The scope of this review does not allow a full-scale discussion on the prevailing notion of sexuality in Bengal at that time, but the accounts of Hindu women writers of the colonial period – such as, Kailashbasini Devi, Kusumkumari Devi, Saratkumari Chaudhurani and many others – point to a different picture of Hindu women than what Hasanat seeks to portray.

Based on the fictional work of *Rupjalal*, Hasanat attempts to establish the supposed "class prejudice and the racist mentality of the Muslim society of [the] 19th century" as Jalāl in the story thinks that "a woman of a low class cannot be taught dignity, especially if she belongs to a low Hindu caste". (p.198) This is Hasanat's biased, over-generalised way of reading the fiction, as she misses to notice that King Rayhan of Sirajnagar and Jalāl's mother in the text are much above any class or communal prejudice. Moreover, although Muslim society was divided into *Ashrāf* and *Ajlāf*, class prejudice and caste hierarchy among Muslims has never been as strident as it is among Hindus. Moreover, it was Hindus who relegated the Muslims to the fifth caste branding them as

*jobon* and *mlechhas*, both highly derogatory. The Hindu sense of purity was so strong that a Muslim's entrance could turn a whole Hindu household impure. Paradoxically, Faizunnesa's own life offsets Hasanat's indictment of racism on Muslims, as the former was known to have been equally supportive of the non-Muslim people living around her.

Hasanat's representation of Faizunnesa's attitude towards polygamy is again problematic. It is a fact the latter suffered terribly in her personal life because of a polygamous relationship but delineates in *Rupjalal* a happy picture of Jalāl's polygamous marriages. Though Hasanat represents Faizunnesa as an anti-polygamy author, it is possible to interpret the text as the latter's endorsement of the Islamic institution of polygamy. The bigamous relations of her husband Mohammad Gazi did not fulfil the required conditions of Islamic polygamy, and he also neglected his second wife Faizunnesa; so such relationships are un-Islamic and perhaps that was the reason why the religious Faizunnesa broke away from her husband. Conversely, Faizunnesa depicts an alternative picture where the husband (Jalāl) encounters inevitable circumstances that compel him to marry two women. What is more, he gives almost equal attention to both his wives, which was not the case with Mohammad Gazi. Therefore, contrary to Hasanat's view, *Rupjalal* sanctions the Islamic principle of polygamy in Islam.

Hasanat is to be complimented for her work of introducing Faizunnesa's work to a global readership and for her beautiful, reader-friendly translation. What makes her work unwieldy is her audacious attempts to make big theological statements about Islam, and that without adequate knowledge about the religion. However, her efficient translation of *Rupjalal* will facilitate more interpretations and encourage further research on the text.

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#### **FEMINISM IN ISLAM: SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS CONVERGENCES.**

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Countless volumes have been written on the issue of Islam and women, by Muslims as well as others. Indeed, the 'Muslim woman' question has for long occupied a central place in discourses about Islam. Interestingly, the vast majority of works on this furiously-debated question have been penned by men. For many male Muslim writers, the notion of normative Muslim womanhood is key to their understanding of Islamic authenticity. For non-Muslim scholars of Islam, it is a central trope in their critique of the religion. Caught between