Traveling and Writing Back: Two Muslim Women in Early Twentieth-Century London

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Abstract

Atiya Fyzee and Zeyneb Hanoum embarked on two unrelated journeys to Europe with enormous fascination for the continent and its people. Their presence in Europe modified their expectations and perceptions of Europeans and their native ways of life. While they appreciated many aspects of their native and host cultures, they also expressed disappointment with failures and shortcomings in both. Even though in their memoirs they shared a heightened fascination for London, both were equally reluctant to call it “home”. Their temporary diasporic experiences in the metropolis put them in the context and vantage position of the “third space” from which they looked at both cultures critically. Importantly, their memoirs present counter-narratives to the West, as both wrote back to Western imperialist and orientalist conceptions of their respective societies. In the early twentieth century, as a tool of imperialist and colonial domination, the Western caricaturing of Eastern cultures and peoples was part of the mainstream narrative; and counter-voices and counter-images were mostly outmaneuvered or wrapped in silence. Hence, Atiya’s and Zeyneb’s counter-narratives were ground-breaking and revolutionary. Their unease with the dominant Western misrepresentation of Eastern societies, perhaps, pointed to a simmering but larger intellectual movement that was gaining momentum globally to question the validity of the Western master narrative.

Introduction

It may sound like a truism to say thank you to the organisers and those who have made time to listen to my presentation. But I feel really grateful to MACFEST for offering me this space to talk about two amazing Muslim women travellers and writers. And I am truly honoured that all of you have shown interest and come on to attend this talk.

I will be discussing two Muslim women who travelled to London in the early twentieth century – Atiya Fyzee from British India and Zeyneb Hanoum from Turkey. I will first introduce them and discuss the production of their travel narratives. In order to differentiate Atiya Fyzee and Zeyneb Hanoum from their sisters who were also writers, I will use their first names.

Both began their journeys in 1906.

Atiya: (1906–7) England and Germany

Zeyneb: (1906–12) France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and England

Both travelled in London extensively.

Currently, roughly 15% of the London population are Muslim. That means more than one million Muslims in London alone.

According to Siobhan Lamber-Hurley, Muslim population in early twentieth-century Britain was roughly ten thousand.

The preferred mode of long-distance travel in the early twentieth century was by sea, as air transportation began to be widely used on a commercial basis only in the 1950s and 1960s.

The three Fyzee sisters are Zehra, Atiya and Nazli. All of them had a modern education and visited Europe. They were involved in establishing Anjumani-Khawatin-i-Islam (Islamic sisters' association) in Aligarh in 1914. They wrote books and contributed to various periodicals.

It is actually tempting to compare them with the children of the Stephen family in London, especially Virginia Woolf and Venessa Bell. Children of both Fyzee and Stephen families were involved in writing and publishing.

Fyzee family was a branch of the illustrious Tyabji clan. The Tyabjis moved from Gujarat and settled in Bombay where they gained importance economically, socially and politically. They are one of the most prominent families of nineteenth-century British India. They actively participated in founding the Indian National Congress that started its journey from Bombay in 1885. Importantly, Atiya's maternal great uncle Badruddin Tyabji (1844-1906) was the third president of the Congress. He was also the first Indian to be called to the Bar. All this tells us about the illustrious family background of Atiya.

She is especially known for her familiarity with two of the most influential twentieth-century South Asian intellectuals, Muhammad Shibli Nomani (1857–1914) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938).

Atiya was unconventional and "unorthodox" in her behaviour in more than one sense. At a time when female education was discouraged or restricted to the home, she made a transcontinental trip for educational purposes at the age of 29 and unmarried.

According to Geraldine Forbes, at that time "marriages could be arranged and performed without any age restriction". Atiya's sister Nazli was married at 12 to a much older man to be his second wife.

Earlier, in 1883, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) married Mrinalini Devi (1873-1902) when he was 22 and the bride Mrinalini Devi was 9 years old.

Despite the widespread practice of early marriage of girls, Atiya remained unmarried until age 35. She married the writer and artist Samuel Rahamin (1880-1964) who was of Jewish origin. While most husbands were much older than their wives at that time and still now, Samuel was younger than Atiya by three years. He converted to Islam before marrying Atiya.

Now I would like to talk about Atiya's book where she describes her London experiences. Among Muslims in British India at that time, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and his wife Muhammadi Begum were pioneers in advancing women's rights. They founded the Lahore-based weekly newspaper *Tahzib un-Niswan* in 1898. Muhammadi Begum was its editor. She had the renown of influencing and supporting many women writers, including Atiya. She persuaded Atiya to record her experiences in Britain and share those with readers of *Tahzib un-Niswan*.

During her stay in London, Atiya sent regular roznamcha or diary entries to her sisters, Zehra and Nazli. Zehra did the initial editorial work and submitted those roznamchas to Muhammadi Begum who prepared them for publication. Thus, Atiya's roznamchas or diaries first appeared periodically in *Tahzib un-Niswan*. They were later published in book form in 1921 as *Zamana-i-Tahsil*. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Sunil Sharma translated the book under the title of "A Time of Education" and included it in their work titled *Atiya's Journeys: A Muslim Woman from Colonial Bombay to Edwardian Britain* (2010).

Like Atiya in India, Zeyneb Hanoum (1883–1923) in Turkey hailed from an elite family background. Her father Mehemed Noury Bey (1858–1908) was Sultan Abdülhamid's (1842-1918, r. 1876-1909) Foreign Secretary. Mehemed Noury Bey's father was a French nobleman "[who] had converted to Islam when in the service of the sultan … [He lived] thereafter as an Ottoman and Muslim under the name Reschid Bey".

Like the Fyzee sisters – Zehra, Atiya and Nazli – Zeyneb and her sister Melek received superior education at home and developed their multilingual credentials: Zeyneb and Melek received education from Western governesses and "spoke five European languages" in addition to Arabic, Persian and Turkish.

In London, an Englishwoman was amazed by Zeyneb's proficiency in French and "imagined" that Zeyneb "was a Frenchwoman". In Italy during her trip to Venice, in the train journey, Zeyneb undertook the voluntary task of an interpreter between an English woman and "two Italian officers". In that role, she spoke English and Italian interchangeably, and did that so well that the Englishwoman thought Zeyneb was an Italian and the two Italian men mistook her for an Englishwoman.

I will now tell you about the production of Zeyneb Hanoum's *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions* (1913) in which she narrates her European, especially London, experiences.

At the beginning of their European trip, Zeyneb and Melek met the British feminist, journalist and photographer Grace Ellison (1880–1935) in France in 1906. They had regular contact and communicated mainly through letters for years, which resulted in the production of three books: Zeyneb's *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions* (1913), Melek's *Abdul Hamid's Daughter: The Tragedy of an Ottoman Princess* (1913) and Ellison's *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem* (1915). Importantly, Ellison edited and arranged the publication of all these three titles. British historian Reina Lewis calls *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions* "a composite text". It contains Ellison's introduction and notes, 19 of Zeyneb's letters and one of Melek's. All the letters were sent to Ellison from various locations in Europe from 1906 to 1912.

Turkish connections:

Interestingly enough, both Atiya and Zeyneb were born in Istanbul. Atiya lived in Bombay and died in Karachi, but had family connections in Istanbul where her merchant father Hassanally Feyzhyder (1843–1903) lived for business dealings. Members of the Fyzee family followed aspects of Turkish culture, especially in sartorial taste. Fyzee women used to wear the Turkish-style loose over-garment charshaf. Atiya's elder sister Zehra is said to have introduced it in India after she had visited "Turkey in the early 1890s". Atiya wore it both in India and in Europe in preference against Western dress.

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley suggests that Muslim travellers over centuries "took motivation from a religious doctrine that prescribes travel for the purpose of hajj (pilgrimage), hijra[h] (emigration) and rihla[h] (learning and other purposes)"

All these three concepts are equally relevant to both Muslim men and women. I would add one more Islamic concept that also suggests that Muslim women cannot remain cocooned in the domestic enclosure. The very practice of hijab indicates that Muslim women may need to go out and meet male strangers.

The concept of rihlah is relevant to Atiya, as she went to London to attend a teacher training college, Maria Grey College which was established in 1878 and has been part of Brunel University since 1976. Her journey to London can also be regarded as Hijrah in the sense of migration for education.

"rihlah 'ilmiyyah (educational tourism or edu-tourism) or rihlah fi talab al-'ilm (travelling in search of knowledge)" is an important aspect in Islam. As the Prophet said:

"One who leaves their home in search of knowledge remains on the path of God until they return."

Zeyneb actually made Hijrah from fear to safety. Although she fled a Muslim-majority, Turkey, to a Muslim-minority Europe, the journey can still be regarded as her hijrah. This is because Hijrah actually means emigration to Dar al-Amn or abode of safety. Muslims have continued to make such hijrahs to the West to avoid oppression in their Muslim-majority countries.

All these show that in Muslim societies, traveling is not always a secular pursuit.

Atiya's and Zeyneb's arrival in Europe created huge curiosity among the Europeans. Zeyneb regards the inquisitiveness that her and her sister Melek's presence in London generated as "an unpleasant discovery" and as espionage. She laments: "Alas! Alas! there is no privacy inside or outside Turkey".

Atiya and Zeyneb were courageous and confident in commenting on aspects of European society and were treated as fantasies of astonishment and wonder in

Europe. As colonial England viewed colonized Indians as backward and inferior, Atiya's unmistakable sophistication and elegance baffled the Londoners; and, as a result, she was "objectified as a symbol of visible difference".

As Zeyneb questioned the representation of Turkish women by Europeans, Atiya did that of Indians, stating: "Until now they had ungainly thoughts regarding Indians. If they meet an Indian who does not meet their fixed views, they become totally flabbergasted. I don't know at which level they place Indians in their minds that everything surprises them!"

London for Atiya

London for Zeyneb

Sharing with readers her experience of visiting University College London in 1907, Atiya says: "Whichever educational institution I go to, I always find some or other Indian girl" (194).

National Indian Association (NIA) – founded by Mary Carpenter (1807–77) and Keshub Chunder Sen (1838–84)

Cambridge Majlis (1891)

Oxford Majlis (1896)

Later the India League (est. 1928)

Indian Muslims settled down in Britain centuries ago. So London was like Atiya's second home.

Conversely, there was no notable Turkish community in England at the time Zeyneb visited the country. Hence, unlike Atiya, she did not benefit from a community of native people in London.

Atiya's India was a British colony, while Zeyneb's Turkey was a sovereign country. And this difference seems manifest in the way they describe London. Zeyneb appears more independent, while Atiya seems to have been carrying a colonial baggage.

Atiya's comments on London are mainly cultural. Zeyneb's more political and critical.

For example, the Suffrage or suffragette movement has remained something of an elephant in the room in Atiya's narrative, while Zeyneb makes detailed comments on it, which I will discuss later in this talk.

Admiration for London, Londoners

Atiya: How can London be described and how can it be imagined without seeing it! Ofo! Such streets and what a grand city, and the shops! It appears very nice when it is lit up at night. The way each shop is decorated – it's truly a skill. How much can a person see; people are models of fashion and get-up … God knows how these people are so accomplished.

Zeyneb: What a magnificent city London is! If you English are not proud of it, you ought to be … It seems to me as if English character were expressed even in the houses of the people … Like ours [in Turkey], the houses here are made for use, and their wide doors and wide passages seem to extend a welcome to you.

London Underground / the Tube

"Every moment this small railway comes and goes, and people are standing ready to board. If you delay it's gone, to appear again in a few moments. It's the working of a jinn" (Fyzee 2010, 158).

Atiya was familiar with railway transportation, as railways were established in India first in her native city Bombay in 1853. But the first underground railway in India was established only in 1984, and that in Calcutta.

So, when she saw The Tube, she was taken by a pleasant surprise.

Private space of women

"It is a luxury to cook on an English stove and thus to keep a clean kitchen. If only food could be cooked in this way in India, it would be so convenient" (Fyzee 2010, 183).

There is a maid here who cooks, waits at the table, and cleans the house. Deliver hot water in the morning, take tea to every room, listen for knocking at the door at all times and answer it, tend the garden, clean the brass objects – one woman here does the same work as six servants in Bombay … And with all this service, the maid's cap and apron are spick and span, and the hair is combed neatly. (Fyzee 2010, 180)

"Truly, if this nation did not have these virtues, then half the world wouldn't be in their control. They are really accomplished people" (Fyzee 2010, 191).

Here Atiya is overenthusiastic and makes an extravagant claim. In fact, in the heyday of its colonial clout, Britain had under its dominion "approximately one-quarter of the world's land surface and governed around one-fifth of its population" (Lloyd 2007).

Islam and Londoners

“These people are so conscious of cleanliness. There is no trouble for them to observe the cleaning rules of us Muslims. To accept English ways in a Muslim manner is a simple, easy, and effortless task” (Fyzee 2010, 149).

Atiya is alluding to the Islamic concepts of taharah (physical cleanliness) and nazafah (neatness). The Prophet said: “Cleanliness is part/half of faith.”

In this country the sea of learning flows with a force and many fortunate people benefit from it. It is true that only knowledge benefits human beings. Honour in life and paradise in the after-life, it gives a rank in both worlds. May God make the light of learning shine again in our community, inshallah. Atiya Fyzee, “Zamana-i-tahsil”, op. cit., p. 149.

Atiya states: “Many such people who have dedicated their lives to knowledge were gathered there. A marvellous group! I saw a new world: everyone immersed in competition and trying to outdo the others. I was amazed”.

Here Atiya is perhaps talking about many Muslims who went to London for educational purposes. Like herself, her near contemporary Shahbano Begum Maimoona Sultan (1900–82) and their male contemporaries and prominent Muslim personalities from British India, such as, Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872–1953), Abdul Qadir (1874–1950), Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) and Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari (1880–1936)—conceivably driven by the spirit of rihlah—travelled to Britain in search of learning.

Among all the prominent Muslim intellectuals in England, in *Zamana-i-Tahsil*, Atiya pays the highest tribute to Abdullah Yusuf Ali for his scholarship, oratory and immense influence among the literati and intellectuals of early twentieth-century London. Atiya’s ability to correlate London’s importance as a centre of intellectual excellence and Islam’s emphasis on knowledge shows her Islamic consciousness and her ability to understand the religion in the context of her contemporary society.

At times Atiya seems overwhelmed by her admiration for the British and simplistic about her country people. For example, once she attended an event in London where speakers were discussing Indian Muslims. The British author and colonial administrator William Lee-Warner (1846–914) was commenting on Indian Muslims. As Atiya puts it:

> Finding an opportunity, Mr Lee-Warner also spoke of how he lived in India … and, what he had observed there of the Muslims, there seemed to be no hope for their future progress and betterment. It is a slothful community. They don’t know anything except the past, and so on … he spoke the truth, if we feel bad that’s our choice. (Fyzee 2010, 163)

Although there is some amount of truth in this statement, here Atiya seems to have missed the colonial element that contributed to the plight of Indian Muslims.

Atiya’s reconsidered opinion

In a speech titled “Epic Women of India” which Atiya delivered during her trip to America in 1918 and which was published in the New York-based journal *Asia* in 1919, she glorified India’s past and summarily blamed its “fall” on “the advent of British rule” (Lambert-Hurley and Sharma 2010, 39).

Scotland Yard

It may be comforting to the MET authorities to know Atiya’s and Zeyneb’s admiration for the London police service, especially given the recent scandals and controversies in which they found themselves embroiled.

Atiya and Zeyneb hold in high regard the officers of Scotland Yard or London’s Metropolitan Police Service. In commending London’s “excellent police system” (Fyzee 2010, 155), Atiya narrates a story involving herself that happened in mid-November 1906. She was travelling in London by bus with her brother Ali Azhar and her good friend Catherine Firth, who was also a student of Maria Grey College. On the bus, Atiya felt warm, took off her raincoat and put it next to her. However, when leaving the bus, she forgot to take the raincoat. Upon realizing this after a few minutes, all three of them rushed back to the bus station where they had disembarked and discovered the bus had already departed. Then Catherine Firth reported it to the Lost Property Office at Scotland Yard. Amazingly, only a week later, Atiya received a letter from the police informing her the raincoat was found and advising her to collect it. She was “stunned” by the carefulness, meticulousness and professionalism of London’s policing practices (Fyzee 2010, 156).

While Atiya’s experience with London’s police system was marked by her admiration for the diligence and professionalism of its personnel, Zeyneb was struck by London police officers’ cordiality and readiness to help people, as well as by their honesty. She exclaims:

“Whatever difficulty I have, they seem to be able to help me, and the most curious of all curious things is, they will not accept tips! What wonderful men! and what a difference from our policemen in Constantinople! In Constantinople, I trembled almost at the sight of a policeman, but here I cannot imagine what I should do without them.” (Hanoum 1913, 182)

The historian David Campion, argues that colonial Britain maintained an egalitarian system of government at home and its complete antithesis in the colonies. It “was simultaneously the world’s leading liberal democracy at home and its largest autocratic state in colonial India; ruling one society by popular representation and consent and the other by executive fiat and coercion” (Campion 2003, 218).

Given the colonial relationship, the British young men who went to the colony to join the Indian Imperial Police held superior ranks and adopted a policing system marked by arrogance and condescension that was unlike anything that existed in the metropolis. Their policing in British India smacked of “abuse and arrogance toward the communities among whom they had patrolled” (Campion 2003, 229).

Like police forces in Sultan AbdulHamid’s Turkey, those in colonial India assumed the political role of surveillance and curtailment of civil liberties, which created an antagonism between them and those they policed. As regards the police in Britain, Atiya and Zeyneb notice that the duty of maintaining public safety predominated. On the contrary, in India and in Turkey the main function of the policing system was to contain political dissent and suppress discontent. In British India it was busy silencing activist organizations in order to safeguard the interests and privileges of the colonial state; in Hamidian Turkey, it was spying and curtailing civil liberties, including freedom of expression.

Harem in London

The most distinctive aspect of the harem typically highlighted is its gender exclusivity, as it is often depicted as a single-sex sanctuary for women to which male access is restricted or forbidden. Zeyneb discovered such female-only spaces in London.

In an ironic turn of fate, Zeyneb observes, there was a harem in the British parliament. As she cleverly and humorously wrote to Ellison:

But, my dear, why have you never told me that the Ladies’ Gallery is a harem? A harem with its latticed windows! The harem of the Government! No wonder the women cried through the windows of that harem that they wanted to be free!

I felt inclined to shout out too. "Is it in Free England that you dare to have a harem? How inconsistent are you English! You send your women out unprotected all over the world, and here in the workshop where your laws are made, you cover them with a symbol of protection."

When the parliament was rebuilt after the 1834 fire, the Victorian architect Charles Barry (1795–1860) created Ladies Gallery in the new Palace of Westminster. It had "windows covered with heavy metal grilles, which made it difficult to see or hear … [and it] became both a physical and metaphorical symbol of women's exclusion from Parliament, and later a target of suffragette agitation".

Zeyneb's curious eyes discovered another characteristic harem in London's University Club for Ladies (established in 1887 and renamed University Women's Club in 1921) for professional women.

According to Zeyneb, a women-only club atmosphere is "after all another kind of harem, but it has none of the mystery and charm of the Harem of the East".

Commenting on the harems in London, Zeyneb seeks to prove that women all around the globe are subjected to restrictive measures.

In her conversation with a British woman, Zeyneb told her the reason for her travel to various countries and said: "Like Diogenes who tried to find a Man, I have been trying to find a Free woman, but have not been successful". She refers to the Greek philosopher of the 3rd century BC who pursued self-contentment and freedom from material needs. He wandered through the streets of ancient Athens in daylight with a lantern in his hand in search of an honest man but did not find one. Likewise, Zeyneb was in search of free women and found none in Turkey or in Britain or anywhere else. She believes that women "all the world over" wage "the same futile struggle" for "happiness".

Atiya and Zeyneb critique Englishwomen and regard them as prisoners of social life.

In her book *Britain Through Muslim Eyes*, Claire Chambers maintains that Atiya is "underwhelmed by the vaunted freedoms of European women" (Chambers 2015, 58).

Atiya describes a concert that she attended at the Royal Albert Hall in Kensington. The main attraction of the concert was the contralto singer Clara Butt. About Clara Butt's (1872–936) dress, Atiya says: "God knows how she can bind herself and sing in such a constricted state, and that too with a smile.

These people bear all kinds of tortures for the sake of appearance" (Fyzee 2010, 143).

As opposed to Clara Butt's dress, Atiya praises "Fyzee charshaf" which is "a complete simple outfit". Atiya maintained a sense of pride that she does not adopt "an English cloak" (Fyzee 2010, 151). She also persuaded an Indian woman living in London to discard her "badly tailored and tasteless, gaudy English clothes" and convinces her to "continue wearing [Indian] clothes" in Britain (Fyzee 2010, 154).

Even though women in Turkey did not have "the joys of freedom", they were spared "many worries", the pains and various stresses associated with public life (Hanoum 1913, 117).

According to Zeyneb, British women appeared to have made their social life "the aim and object of their existence" and thus somewhat restricted their freedom, as they could not do what they felt "they ought for fear of compromising a 'social position'" (Hanoum 1913, 118).

Zeyneb concludes that the life of Turkish women is "mysterious" and shrouded in shadows while the life of and British women is "an open book, which all can read who care" (Hanoum 1913, 215).

Zeyneb's criticism of Turkish women is equally unflattering as, according to her, even though they had time to "devote to culture" they were "unreasonably exacting" (Hanoum 1913, 215).

However, Zeyneb "is left in awe of" British suffragettes (Micallef 2013, 101). She extols them for their sense of purpose in life.

Zeyneb makes a distinction between "the suffragettes" and the ordinary "sporting and society women" (Hanoum 1913, 215).

Campaigns for women's enfranchisement in Britain began with John Stuart Mill's petition to parliament in 1866 for women's right to vote. The movement ended in 1928 with the achievement of full adult suffrage. This long period saw the formation of various organizations and activities.

1897: National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)

1903: Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)

The movement for women’s voting right took a violent, that is suffragette, turn in 1905 with the arrests of Annie Kenney (1879–953) and Christabel Pankhurst (1880–958).

Militant acts of the WSPU continued until 1914, which witnessed the split of the organization and expulsion of Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–960) by her mother and sister and the outbreak of World War I (Purvis 2008, 83).

Although the suffragette protests and direct action can be justified given the government’s refusal to grant women their democratic rights, Zeyneb disapproves of the “window-smashing policy” of the suffragettes. She regards them as “ill-advised women” (Hanoum 1913, 236).

After observing the mistreatment women suffered in the streets of London for campaigning for their right to vote, Zeyneb wrote to Ellison: “If this is what the women of your country have to bear in their fight for freedom, all honour to them, but I would rather groan in bondage” (Hanoum 1913, 191).

Zeyneb makes this critique of the campaign for women’s right to vote in chapter 10 of her book. She wrote this particular chapter in 1912 when the “move from mild militancy to more aggressive forms of action” started (Purvis and Wright 2005, 412). It was also in 1912 when the ‘suffragettes’ started to involve “public disorder, such as setting fire to empty buildings and to letter boxes” (Purvis and Wright 2005, 406).

Despite the violent acts that accompanied the struggle for women’s right to vote, Zeyneb is more critical of the disproportionate government response to the suffragette movement and regards one of its opponents as “the notorious Mr. Lloyd George” whose name was “on everyone’s lips” (Hanoum 1913, 194–5).

During Zeyneb’s visit to London, David Lloyd George was the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He later became the Prime Minister of Britain. He was a target of the suffragettes for his views against women’s right to vote. What shocked Zeyneb the most was that he was a politician of the Liberal Party which became Liberal Democrats in 1988.

> I cannot tell you the horrible impression it produces on the mind of a Turkish woman to learn that England not only imprisons but tortures women; to me it is the cataclysm of all my most cherished faiths … It was the land of all lands I longed to visit, and now I hear a Liberal Government is torturing women. (Hanoum 1913, 236)

During Zeyneb’s time in London, newspapers were full of images of the crackdown on the suffragettes. For example, one media report showed that the police placed one imprisoned suffragette “on the chair, forcing her into a slanting position, her head thrown back, while the four attendants each seized her arms and legs, stretching them to their full length, so that her body took the form of a cross” (qtd. in Hartman 2003, 43).

In their travel narratives, Atiya and Zeyneb provide a frank assessment of their impression about London. Their admiration for the city and its people supersedes their criticism.

Despite all her high regard for Britain and for the British, Atiya “cannot ever imagine liking this country enough to remain here forever” (Fyzee 2010, 149).

While Zeyneb says:

“Désenchantée [dezɑ̃ʃɑ̃te] I left Turkey, désenchantée [dezɑ̃ʃɑ̃te] I have left Europe” (Hanoum 1913, 246).

Atiya’s and Zeyneb’s experiences in London can be explained by an anecdote Zeyneb’s Qur’an teacher told her. As the story goes, an Anatolian girl has the tendency to believe whatever she hears. One day, from a window overlooking mountain ridges, she sees a mountainous chain that looks blue and exceptionally beautiful from far. Enthralled by the beauty of the mountains, she starts asking people around her. Delighted to learn the furthest mountain is blue and eager to enjoy its scenic beauty, she embarks on an arduous journey to reach the highest peak. Upon reaching there, she is disappointed to discover only ordinary grass, which is available almost everywhere near her house.

Tenaciously hopeful and determined to find a blue mountain chain, she asks a shepherd for information about a place where she can find it. He directs her to a further and taller mountainous chain. She resumes her difficult journey but is disappointed again to see only grass on the mountain to which the shepherd has directed her. She embarks on similar arduous journeys in search of blue mountains and finally reaches the mountains of Altai in Central and East Asia. To sum up the story, the Anatolian girl makes one journey after another and spends almost her whole life in search of blue mountains. Towards the end of her life she finally realizes “it was the distance that lent the mountains their hue – but it was too late to go back, and she perished in the cold, biting snow” (Hanoum 1913, 238).

What Atiya and Zeyneb heard about Europe before visiting the continent had a romantic dimension. In their imaginations, perhaps, both saw European cities through their rose-tinted lenses and preconceived opinions. However, upon their arrival in Europe, especially London, while they see its glamour and splendours, and much of their positive impression of the city is confirmed, they also notice the not so good sides of the city.

Too many people think the grass is greener somewhere else, but the grass is green where you water it.