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Dutiful Daughters (or not) and the Sins of the Fathers in Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy*¹

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There is a current these days in Indian history and literary scholarship that sees the value of taking into account the perspectives of the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and the generally not-much-listened-to. The work of the *Subaltern Studies* collective, especially the essays in its earlier volumes;² the efforts of Dalit writers and theorists to forge a national space for their voices³; and that branch of feminist scholarship, emerging from both India and its abroad, which, in addition to bringing international attention to writing by Indian women,⁴ has rigorously re-read the classics of Indian literature to reveal their gender implications—all stand as testaments to this undeniably laudable political commitment. And yet, after three decades of such literary and historical research, some of it informed by a postcolonial theory that frequently claims to champion these very suppressed politics and identities, when it comes to the literary history of colonial India, what routinely finds its way into print in English is a view of events that is often mainstream and privileged, espousing ideals and judging experiences from a standpoint that is unapologetically, because usually also unselfconsciously, Hindu, high-caste, middle or upper-middle class, and masculine.⁵ Such a view makes the doings and opinions of well-known Hindu male elites its touchstone. Consequently, a good deal of attention is paid to, for instance, the political opinions of Jawaharlal Nehru or M.K. Gandhi, and the policies and tactics of the Indian National Congress function as the revolutionary norm, as if the Congress mounted the only plausible response to British imperialism and as if the only national issue that mattered at the time was the anti-colonial movement. Given this focus, it hardly seems surprising that those novels that frame India's pre-independence period in terms of this narrow mainstream band are the ones that tend to get published and republished.⁶ Of the Indian fiction in English written prior to 1947, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, and Mulk Raj Anand's and R.K. Narayan's early novels are typically the only literary works that are continuously in print and consequently are also consistently the subjects of literary analysis and interpretation.⁷ All three writers are male, middle-class, and high-caste Hindus as well as being, in the main, supportive of the sorts of ideologies and political priorities that Congress nationalism also advocated.

The result of the incessant reiteration of this very specific and, it is important to remember, *not* universal viewpoint is that it is invariably done at the expense of other, equally significant literary emanations from late colonial India. I am certainly not the only person who has noticed that this emphasis on the mainstream has drowned diversity. The anthology *Women's Voices: Selections from Nineteenth and Early-twentieth Century Indian Writing in English*, which co-editor Eunice De Souza had originally hoped to title "The Lost Tradition" because "most of the women included have been forgotten or ignored," is an attempt to address these holes in literary history. In a 2006 essay in *Economic and Political Weekly*, she describes the neglect of early writing by women as a "distortion" of "the history of Indian writing in English which is far more rich and varied than the accounts in these histories would suggest" (1642). I would further suggest that the loss of these works as a result of their unavailability in print and their disregard by literary scholars represents a kind of disfigurement of India's multi-vocal history.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain's 1944 novel *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household*, though clever in its irony, at times humorous and always brave in its depiction of injustice, is one such piece of literature that has fallen away from history. Although the man who introduced it to the world, Ramalinga Reddy, believed that hardly a novel published in India had a "better claim to become famous than Mrs. Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy*" (1) and literary scholar Jessica Berman has recently deemed it "one of the most striking narratives of its period" (216), it did not receive much attention when it first appeared and has yet to be reprinted. This novel was written at a time when middle-class Indian women's demands for equality under the law and in the home were being presented in public more forcibly than ever before in the history of the nationalist movement.⁸ Hussain's novel fits into this history beautifully, for it paints images of urban life in India from the perspectives of its women, and her portrait is not an admiring or even clearly a hopeful one. It is, instead, complex, difficult to pin down, because it is subtle in both its expression and its implications.

For example, when an unidentified female character in the second chapter comes to the mockingly named, *purdah*-practising house, *Dilkusha*, or *Happy Heart*, on the occasion of the patriarch's death to help console the newly widowed and emotionally distraught Zuhra, she makes the following statement: "What is the life of a woman after her husband? A woman lives for him and him alone. His death should mean the death of all her desires, comfort and happiness. Even the dogs are shown better consideration . . ." (14). There is a striking ambivalence in this passage, which is typical of Hussain's writing in this novel. The woman appears initially to be offering us one of those common platitudes that proclaim feminine acquiescence to suffering, platitudes which are found throughout Indian literature and which supposedly exalt women as the bearers of their family's and, by extension, their nation's pain. Yet the outrage or despair suggested in the final sentence is so incongruent with that acquiescence

that readers are made unsure of what is being communicated here or how we are supposed to feel about it. The levels of complexity that *Purdah and Polygamy* offers its readers make it a resonant text. What we do know is that there is little consolation or certainty in the world of this novel where dogs, children, servants, and, above all, men are accorded more respect, viewed with more compassion, and granted immeasurably more liberty than women, who are, ironically, also thought to be the repositories of their family's pride and honour. This unidentified speaker is one of the many, including the narrator herself, whose testimonies and opinions about women's lives in an Indian Muslim household fill the pages of this novel. Some of the female characters reiterate the dictates of middle-class Muslim patriarchy in the 1940s; others protest, and many do both. None acquiesce without a struggle, and all of them struggle.

In her questioning of the status of elite Muslim women in colonial India, Hussain joins the ranks of Muslim women reformers. These include Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali writer, whose essays and one short piece of fiction, "Sultana's Dream," register a significant attack on the concept and practice of male supremacy, and Sakinatul Fatima Wazir Hasan, an activist in the social reform movement of the thirties and forties, who in 1936 asserted that

Among the upper and middle classes *purdah* is still the rule, and orthodoxy which seems to have found its last resort among the Muslims of India, is firmly entrenched. There is no other Muslim country in the world where in social matters like the *purdah*, marriage, and status of women generally, so much dull-witted reaction prevails as in India. (24)

While Hossain and Hasan wrote in English, around the same time—that is, in the few decades before 1947—Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai were also writing plays and short stories in Urdu that were highly critical of Indian society's treatment of women.⁹ I link Hussain specifically with these other women writers of the day, and point to who knows how many other Muslim women in colonial India whose writings and speeches lie unpublished and unattended to in archives and libraries, because I am convinced that they are part of a significant trend of thought among Muslim women prior to independence in 1947, a trend that does not get much attention in literary or any other histories of modern India and, in fact, is frequently erased because of the tendency of scholars to allow larger streams and louder voices to drown out the politics of those who do not agree.

Even in women's histories, the politics of Muslim women is generally represented as much hampered and contained by other, more powerful allegiances. For instance, Gail Minault constructs Muslim female activists as entirely constrained by the course and strategy of Muslim minority politics:

The women of reformist families followed the lead of their men in championing education for girls without demanding an end to *purdah*. The prestige of their status

and the distinctiveness of Muslim culture were at stake, and in a society where Muslims felt threatened by their minority status, the pressure upon Muslim women not to break ranks with their community was overwhelming. (“Other Voices” 121)

In a later book on the subject of Muslim women’s education in colonial India, however, Minault offers some small qualification of her earlier statement when she writes, “[w]omen, once given a voice, did not always turn out to be dutiful daughters, although most of them did. Elite women had many reasons to uphold the honour and status of their families, and few reasons to defy them” (*Secluded Scholars* 307). Similarly overstating the case, in her otherwise excellent book *Muslim Women in India*, Shahida Lateef insists that the participation of Muslim women in the Indian women’s movement “was *always* overshadowed by Muslim separatist politics, so bitterly fought through the critical decades 1920-1947 Also the exigencies of their minority status impelled their compliance with Muslim Personal Law even when unjustly applied” (my italics [94]). The general picture of the pre-independence politics of India’s Muslim women is one in which they toed the male line, either because they agreed with the conservative men of their communities or because they felt compelled to subordinate their own demands to the seemingly more important dictates of Muslim minority politics, and, further, that they were willing to continue on this course even when it meant that their rights under the law and their status in their homes were undermined.

It is not my intention here to doubt the validity of this “general” picture. What I do question, however, are statements, like Minault’s, that make resistance seem impossible (because hegemonic pressure is “overwhelming”) and improbable (there were “few reasons” for women to trade their elite status for more personal freedom) or assertions, such as Lateef’s, that generalize beyond the point of believability (the women’s participation in the feminist movement was “always overshadowed by Muslim separatist politics”). While these may appear to be minor points of criticism, the correction of which requires merely the change of a word or the reconstruction of a sentence, such statements in historical discourse suggest the presence of certain unacknowledged principles at work in a text, which seek the dominant and expect it to represent the whole, even in histories of disenfranchised or subordinated groups. If feminist and other alternative histories are to be truly alternative—that is, if their purpose is to bring about significant change in the historical disciplines, beyond that which can be accomplished with simple strategies of inclusiveness—they need not only to tell different stories but to reconfigure the premises on which traditional, mainstream history has been written.

Among those premises is the assumption that history consists of a single line of events and ideas—usually those events and ideas associated with the elite classes—that functions as the locus through which all competing events and ideas are assessed and made to seem derivative or dependent. A history that would challenge this trajectory might see a variety of lines, some of which overlap while others conflict, and all of

which struggle to make meaning of events and ideas but can make that meaning only in negotiation with one another. Even dominant lines of history are altered by their forced interaction with the not-so-dominant.

Another premise of mainstream historiography is that history belongs to majority opinion, which is often figured as the opinion of those few who claim to speak for the majority. What invariably happens, then, is that the loudest component in the struggle—those who have the greatest access to public speaking spaces and are comfortable with these avenues of expression—get to set the stage, call the shots, and represent themselves as the voice of a majority, a majority which is impossible to count and whose opinions are frequently too complicated and sometimes contradictory to distil to some point of consensus. Given the incredibly entangled nature of individual opinion and belief, it seems fruitless to try to generalize about groups as diverse as the Indian people, the Muslim minority, or even Muslim women. Indeed, if such statements as Lateef's and Minault's are as true as they grammatically present themselves to be, the kind of Muslim female politics in which Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sakinatul Fatima Wazir Hasan, Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, and Iqbalunnisa Hussain participated—a politics that did not follow the lead of their men, that was not overshadowed or overwhelmed by Muslim separatism, that, in short, was not dutiful—would be inconceivable.

Far from inconceivable, the idea that some Muslim women criticized rather than fell in line with the doctrines of the larger patriarchal societies in which they lived, and, more importantly, encouraged other women to adopt a self-interest that would over-ride both their community's and their families' interests is amply evident in the writings of these women and apprehendable by anyone who is willing to go somewhat out of their way. There are a few published sources for colonial women's writing, more in Urdu than in English,¹⁰ but many early twentieth-century texts are out of print. That such a stance at such a time needs to be uncovered and contextually interpreted—rather than mentioned, maybe celebrated, and then dismissed as exceptional—becomes clear when we recognize the efficacy and utility of knowing more about history than mainstream narratives, historical or literary, can tell us. Writing about Muslim Indian identity politics in the 1990s, after the escalation in communal violence of the 1980s and early 1990s, which dramatically showcased the renewal of fundamentalist forces among both India's Hindu and Muslim populations, Zoya Hasan describes the potential that lies in these unappreciated places and submerged voices:

Forging community identities does not imply or guarantee that women will always identify themselves with or adhere to prevailing religious doctrines which legitimise their subordination. Submerged identities can become the foci of resistance and alternative solidarities. In this context, a critical point of enquiry is the nature of consent as well as resistance by women to the identity assigned to them by community leadership. (xv)

There is a line that can be drawn between Hussain's 1944 novel and women in India today, for *Purdah and Polygamy* is part of the history of opposition to community dictates that these women have inherited. As such, the novel can serve as a focus of resistance through which an alternative solidarity might be fashioned. By exposing the nexus of interlocking customs, ideology, and family power structures that sought to circumscribe middle-class Muslim women's lives and literally to trap them in their homes, what *Purdah and Polygamy* does is reveal the cost to women of serving as emblems of a community's identity.

Hussain's novel opens with a passage that immediately renders this nexus visible: "Dilkusha was an imposing building, standing in the heart of a city. It commanded respect and awe, if premises have any such effect, among the neighbouring shops, restaurants, cafes and hotels. Its high blind walls made a stranger take it for an unguarded jail, and literally it was so for its women folk" (1). The narrator goes on to describe how, because of the practice of purdah, the entrance of a man into the women's quarters sends women scurrying into their rooms, away from the yard "which was their only source of light and fresh air" (1). The effect of purdah in the actual lives of the women forced to endure it is one of the themes that the novel explores in detail. But perhaps the clearest expression of its consequences occurs when Maghbool, the third wife of the novel's polygamist Kabeer and the female character whose personal excellence and talents make hers the greatest sacrifice to male authority, castigates her father for marrying her to a devious, polygamous man. Reflecting on the difference between the experience of purdah in her natal family home and in the home of her husband, Maghbool remarks, "A woman being transferred from a semi-prison to a real one has no aim in life" (191). We are meant to sympathize with the wives in this novel, and from the perspective of many of them, most forms of purdah, no matter how laced they are with love and good intentions, are unfortunate.

The issue of purdah was one of the principal platforms of the pre-independence Indian women's movement. By the Hindu middle-and upper-class women who dominated the movement in the 1920s and 1930s, it was repeatedly denounced as a "deplorable custom . . . which degrades India in the eyes of the world" (Rukhmabai 148) and as "an infliction on the natural dignity of womanhood" (Rukhmabai 145). For those Hindu women who disagreed with the custom, it could be combated with a rhetoric that traced its origins to the Islamic invasion of India and explained its subsequent adoption by Hindu elites as the effects of a corrupting influence. This highly questionable interpretation of purdah history in India, which, during the nationalist movement, was used by Hindu revivalists and fundamentalists to reconstruct a Hindu history of women that was untainted by oppressive structures from outside the Hindu fold, has been repeated so many times by so many writers that it has entered the realm of common sense, though today in India there is a concentrated effort by feminist historians to uncover its destructive communalist overtones. At the time, however, this rhetoric had a

demonstrable influence on the lives of Indian women. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri argues, “Hindu women found it easier to break purdah, especially once it was labelled a Muslim custom, without roots in one’s culture. Muslim women were in a sense forced to defend it as distinctive of their cultural identity” (160).

Among some members of the Muslim community, support for purdah could be gleaned from Islamic texts, though the issue was always one of interpretation. The kind of purdah sanctioned by the Prophet—whether complete seclusion, simple veiling, or basic modest conduct—was open for debate. Hence the comment, “I consider the purdah which is customary among the Muslim woman to be the best we can have,” by the nineteenth-century Muslim reformer Syed Ahmed Khan (qtd. in Chaudhuri, *Indian Women’s Movement* 90) could be contested some 40 years later by the Begum of Bhopal, a woman who, though she spent much of her life in purdah, rejecting it only towards the end of that life, would declare in a report to the All India Women’s Conference, “[t]he present strictness of purdah system among Muslims does not form part of their religious obligations. The Mussalmans should coolly and calmly decide whether by respecting a mere custom they should keep their women in a state of suspended animation” (qtd. in Lateef 78; see also Basu and Ray 72). According to Minault, in the decade or so before Hussain published her novel, many Muslim women who had previously supported purdah because of its increasing association with Muslim identity in India, were shifting their views on the matter:

With the spread of women’s education—the very success of the AKI’s mission [the Anjuman-I-Khavatin-I-Islam or All-India Muslim Ladies’ Conference]—and with growing political activism among women in the 1920s and ‘30s, more and more educated Muslim women began to regard purdah as a nuisance, if not intolerable. (*Secluded Scholars* 296-97)

And yet despite arguments against purdah advanced by activists like the Begum of Bhopal, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sakinatul Fatima Wazir Hasan, and many, many others, the custom continued to be so widely practised that when Hussain wrote her novel in the 1940s, she could depict every, single one of her middle-class Muslim female characters in a strict state of purdah and not stretch the bounds of the social realist mode in which she was writing.

The seeming intractability of purdah not only had everything to do with its designation as a Muslim custom and therefore its central place in Muslim cultural revivalism but also with its attachments to concepts of elite-class status and male honour. For certain Indian families throughout various regions of India, the existence of a women’s quarters in the home and the seclusion of the family’s women was a signal of prosperity. Working-class families could not generally keep their women in purdah since financial necessity required all adult members as well as some of the children to work outside the home. Purdah, then, was one of the indicators of middle- and upper-class difference from and hence superiority to

working-class life.¹¹ None of the female servants depicted in Hussain's novel are in purdah, and, consequently, they are able to move between households: carrying messages, doing errands, and providing services. Significantly, the purdah of the middle-class families is shown to be largely dependent on the fact that the female maids, ayahs, and cooks who form the novel's working-class strata are not in purdah.

Still, the social prestige of purdah is disproportionately enjoyed, the novel suggests, by the middle-class husbands, fathers, and brothers, for whom the seclusion of female family members is intimately tied to personal pride. So when Kabeer's son Akram begins to send love letters to his best friend's recently widowed sister Asmath, her brother's extreme response once the illicit liaison is discovered borders on ludicrousness: "Father will hold me responsible for all this. I have either to commit suicide or murder him [Akram]" (253). He subsequently calls Asmath a "disgraceful wretch!" (254), shames her into refusing to communicate with Akram ever again, then refuses to remain friends with him. Apparently, his honour does not demand that he actually go through with his threat to commit homicide or suicide. It is enough that Asmath harbour her secret shame and that Akram be banished from the household. Muslim Indian honour in the novel is intricately bound up with female actions and behaviour and hardly at all with the actions and behaviour of their male relatives. That this is an absurd equation which generates unreasonable and even silly behaviour and creates a tremendously unnecessary burden for middle-class girls and women to bear is one of the primary points in Hussain's interpretation of Muslim Indian society.

Just as purdah, though it is shored up by the actions and statements of most of the men as well as many of the women, is shown to actually benefit only the men, so too is polygamy represented as having appalling consequences for the women. It sets up the wives of Kabeer as rivals with one another to their own individual and collective detriment. The camaraderie and social advantage that the wives are sacrificing when they compete with one another is made especially apparent at those few moments in the novel when the women combine forces to address a problem or complete a household task. Maghbool, for example, though she has been told by Kabeer to consider herself his only love and to see the first wife Nazni as a "ghost" and the second Munira as a "servant" (147), nevertheless comes to the aid of the abandoned and despised Munira at the time of the delivery of Munira's first child and, as a result, wins her affection and devotion. And once Kabeer marries a fourth wife, Noorjahan, in secret, keeping her in a separate household to avoid the criticism of his family and community, the three other wives at Dilkusha unite to try to discover the cause of Kabeer's negligence. The narrator describes their solidarity: "They often held a three-cornered table conference in either Nazni's or Maghbool's room. They were not jealous of each other, on the other hand the common ailment had made them friends against the formidable enemy" (280). Of all the women in the novel, only Zuhra, the mother of Kabeer, openly and enthusiastically

advocates polygamy, and she does this only to secure for herself a daughter-in-law whom she can control more effectively than Nazni, a daughter-in-law who “would be an unpaid servant entirely at her disposal” (70). But, while Munira is especially under her thumb and Kabeer’s, all the wives, even Maghbool, are damaged by polygamy, since its practice in the household requires them to be in a constant state of surveillance and self-consciousness because they are repeatedly played off one another by both Kabeer and his mother.

Yet if polygamy is represented as injurious to the personal happiness and even the health of the wives in the family, its effect on men is also disastrous. The loving fathers of Nazni and Maghbool are rendered helpless by it; both are unable to protect their daughters from the desperate discontent it brings them, though Maghbool’s father, Faiz Mohammed, does manage to secure a significant mahar or dower for his child, an achievement that Nazni’s father, Douloth Khan, recognizes: “So he made her economically independent. Now I understand why he was indifferent in the choice of the son-in-law. He made it a business. I spent a lakh of rupees on the marriage of my daughter yet I left her in a helpless condition” (171). One of the patriarchal justifications for the male control of women is that such control serves to protect them. But this is clearly not at all true in *Purdah and Polygamy*, where fathers and brothers lament but cannot and do not protect their daughters and sisters.

Interestingly, the novel suggests that perhaps the most ruinous outcome of polygamy is in the life and character of the polygamist himself. In his unbridled pursuit of his own fleeting desires, Kabeer is transformed into an irresponsible and socially despised man, who behaves perpetually like a spoiled child. Although the narrator at one point describes him as “not a very bad type of man” (255), his actions turn him into a self-deceived fool. Kabeer’s deplorable lack of self-consciousness is the subject of much of the novel’s humour. After neglecting his first three wives in favour of his fourth, who is young and beautiful, he finds a way to justify his behaviour:

He said to himself that he lived exclusively with his first wife for some years, and he did the same with the second and the third. If he did not do the same with the fourth he would be doing her an injustice. Doing justice to one’s wife is compulsory as it is laid down in the holy book and was emphasised by the originator of Islam. It was his bounden duty to think of her and satisfy all her needs for some years by forgetting those who had already had such privileges for years and years.

How long were those old hags desirous of monopolising the luxuries of life? They should be considerate and forgo their interest in favour of others. Have not the great religions of the world taught the precept, Love your neighbour as you would love yourself? What does it mean if not sacrifice [of] one’s happiness in preference to others. If he persisted in his changed behaviour towards them he would be teaching them a lesson which would prove advantageous all their lives. (279)

Kabeer’s extreme selfishness, a trait that the novel suggests is cultivated in men by the practice of polygamy, makes him entirely unable to see what the narrator and the reader can see: that his wives are the ones who have

made all the sacrifices, that they, in fact, are his moral superiors. Polygamy, Hussain seems to be saying here, turns men into tyrannical idiots.

It is significant that it is the ridiculous Kabeer who refers to the Qur'an when he tries to justify polygamy. Unlike many Muslim reformers, women or otherwise, Hussain's critique of the wrongs done to Muslim women is not embedded in a re-interpretation of Islamic scriptural teachings. Nowhere in the novel does she cite the Prophet's edicts concerning purdah, and only rarely does she mention Islamic tenets concerning polygamy, and these she refers to subversively and for comic effect, as in the passage above, and earlier, when Kabeer's brother-in-law learns that he has taken a third wife and contemptuously comments, "You seem to have aimed at capturing the whole feminine world on the pretext of *Tabligh-e-Islam*" (152). Hussain's unwillingness to traffick in Islamic religious authority is tied up with her attempt to demonstrate that Muslim ideology regarding women, far from being divinely sanctioned, is, in fact, man-made. Again and again in the novel, through such techniques as narratorial comment, irony, and dialogue, Hussain suggests that the social system that confines women, physically and symbolically, is solely the product of male dominance. One of her more progressive male characters, the brother of Kabeer's first wife Nazni, whom we are encouraged to admire, condemns Kabeer's second marriage as evidence of his infidelity to Nazni. When his father, Douloth Khan argues that she should nevertheless return home to Kabeer and submit to his wishes, the brother replies: "That's all humbug. Man being both the legislator and executor has brought in laws to suit his interests. He has monopolised freedom and luxury. A woman has no right to question even when she is wronged" (114). This call to a greater morality than the one invented by men also occurs earlier on in the text, this time through the narrator, who states

It is a well known fact that man is superior to woman in every respect. He is a representative of God on earth and being born with His light in him deserves the respect and obedience that he demands . . . His polygamous nature has an excuse: a man doing brave deeds needs every sacrifice by others. A woman who does not show the proper spirit of gulping down ready-made beliefs is condemned by the rest as douzakhi (hellish). The great fuss made over him gives him no time for introspection. He has accepted and assimilated the dogmas without analysing them. Unequal distribution of labour and regard is the social code made by man in his own interest. (49)

In this passage the reader moves from the irony of the first few sentences, to the mockery implicit in terms like "gulping down" and "great fuss," and finally to the declaration that the sexual division of "labour and regard" that Indian society prides itself on preserving is only the consequence of inadequate analysis and male control. By resisting the temptation to define social practices like purdah and polygamy within the parameters of theological interpretation, Hussain is implicitly challenging the strategy commonly used by both male and female Muslim reformers who publicly

tackled the “woman question.” This strategy cannot work, she implies, because it subordinates the rights of women to the issue of Muslim cultural and political identity, an identity that is premised, at least in part, on the subjugation of women. For Hussain, a people “enslaved by dogmas, customs and a false sense of dignity” (246) cannot hope to raise children who will not repeat the sins of their fathers.

Hussain’s apparent reticence to associate the oppression of the women in the novel with the Qur’an or with Indian Muslim culture alone can also be interpreted as an attempt to speak across community boundaries and address the general subjugation of Indian women. Reading the novel in this way also explains its tendency to speak in gender generalizations, when, for example, the narrator ironically asserts sexist platitudes, such as the one already quoted above, “It is a well known fact that man is superior to woman in every respect” or when a progressive voice argues for gender justice, as Nazni’s brother does: “It is a blessing to make a woman independent and strong irrespective of man’s interest. It is a crime to leave her in a dejected, hopeless and helpless condition” (115). As I have already noted, neither purdah nor polygamy in colonial India were distinctly Muslim customs, since many Hindu communities also practised them. The novel can therefore be read as addressing both communities and any others that find similar justifications for similar subjugations.

I would go so far as to argue that, in addition to its commitment to gender justice, *Purdah and Polygamy* also engages a politics that works against communalist thought. And I think this is evident in the novel’s depiction of its male characters, who are not uniform in their views of women but are diversely and complexly constructed: some, such as Kabeer’s father Umar, are unabashedly repressive, while others, such as Nazni’s brother, are appalled by the very ideals and practices that men like Umar endorse and promote, and still others, Doulat Khan for instance, simply appear anxious and uneasy about the situations in which their daughters are enmeshed and their own complicity in putting them there. A good deal of the novel is concerned with delineating their efforts to protect their women. We watch them struggle with the entrenched discrimination that so undermines their daughters and sisters. Furthermore, the male characters too must pay a price to maintain this system that privileges them so irrationally—Kabeer is rendered selfish and stupid by his polygamy, and the fathers of Nazni and Maghbool, though both powerful men, are still weak in the face of a patriarchal system larger and more powerful than they are. By offering a compassionate view of the difficult circumstances under which men as well as women must conduct their lives, by showing men and women jointly suffering because they are caught up within a structure that they can alter only slightly, the novel seems to be saying that the problems in Indian society are not merely Muslim problems nor women’s problems; they are instead systemically rooted in Indian society and so are everyone’s problems. That *Purdah and Polygamy* was written in the early 1940s, a time when growing

communalist forces in India would eventually produce the Partition massacres that accompanied the transfers of power in India and Pakistan, and that it refuses to pander to these forces by caricaturing Muslim men as unvaryingly despotic or by confining its critique to them alone, would also seem to suggest that it can be considered an anti-communalist rather than an anti-Muslim novel.

Purdah and Polygamy is concerned about the future of Muslim society in India and about the children who will choose either to replicate the past or move on to another, more just society. Its ending is ambivalent about that future. On the one hand, there is Akram, Kabeer and Nazni's son, who, after initially following his father's lead and pursuing sexual and social liaisons with more than one woman, begins to wonder about the consequences of his actions in the lives of the women he desires: "Was it a well-trodden road to make an ideal for his life? . . . The miseries of the ladies in the Zenana . . . flashed across his mind. How could his father be so heartless as not to guess what were his wives' feelings and what kind of life he had given them? . . . He felt that if something terrible did not happen to his father for having killed so many hearts he would be surprised" (294). In an apparent act of divine retribution, something terrible does happen to Kabeer. He dies in middle age after an apoplectic fit. But Akram vows to look after his mother and her now-three co-wives. There is also a happier ending for Maghbool, who escapes from the house. She is able to do this because her father has made her economically independent of Kabeer by ensuring that her marriage dower included 10,000 rupees and a house of her own.

On the other hand, there are indications at the end that the power structure will endure with new actors in the places of victor and victims. The final lines tell us that the painful death of Zuhra has left open her place as the household's female persecutor and dispenser of male-defined justice: "Nazni achieved the coveted position. Munira and Noorjahan being helpless continued in the same house under Nazni's regime" (510). Of the four wives, one gets out, and of the three who remain, one promises to repeat the sins of the fathers through the role of the patriarchally complicit matriarch.

Ramalinga Reddy, who wrote the Foreword to *Purdah and Polygamy* maintains that Hussain is "no cynic . . . her hopes of progress are not dead and cold. If she probes, it is to cure" (3). I am not quite so confident that a cure for female oppression can be found in Hussain's novel. The complexities of the problem – the fact that she shows women participating in the subjugation of women in alliance with men, that custom and ideology both work to keep women secluded and almost without defense—seem to me to point to her belief in the perpetuation of Indian patriarchy, at least in the near future beyond the novel. But nor am I convinced that cynicism is as useless a stance as Reddy suggests it is. Cynicism, sometimes called resistance in feminist theory, can be subversive if it is able to locate and analyze the vulnerabilities in the dominant discourse. Hussain certainly probes the weak spots in male

supremacy in colonial India. It is, she proclaims throughout the novel, constructed by men, and, therefore, it can be deconstructed and dismantled by women. *Purdah and Polygamy* represents a rejection of sexism, female submissiveness, and male domination. All by itself, it is defiant in the face of patriarchy. When it is linked to other women's defiance, as I think it should be and as I have tried to do here, it joins a disharmonious chorus of rebellious female speech acts that is centuries old and that forms the ground on which stand the contemporary women's movements of India and Pakistan.

Today in post-independent India, both *purdah* and polygamy, while not as commonly found as during the colonial period, are still lived realities for many women. Indeed, the right of Muslim men to marry more than one wife is constitutionally protected by means of Muslim Personal Law, as are their rights to initiate divorce and claim custody of their children after divorce. At the same time, however, Articles 14-18 of the Indian Constitution guarantee all citizens equality before the law and prohibit discrimination on the basis of, among other things, sex or religion. The contradiction between Muslim women's equality as individual citizens and their subjection to certain Muslim family laws that grant husbands rights over them can be traced to two sources: it is a historical legacy of British imperialism, which created different law codes for different communities, often relying on religious knowledge extracted from the most conservative elements in each community, and on Orientalist assumptions. However, it also emerged from the careful efforts of the original framers of the Constitution, who, while ensuring equality for everyone, sought to preserve cultural diversity for all Indians, but especially for those minority groups who were rendered physically and politically insecure by the, at that time, recently experienced trauma caused by the violent events that accompanied the Partition. As Hasan explains further,

There is little reason to doubt that the denial of rights to Muslim women, which are available to women of other faiths, is a violation of the constitutional provision that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion. Yet the allowances made to accommodate personal laws were directly related to the government policy of respect for all religions. ("Minority Identity" 62)

The courts are often the place where the discrepancy between the Constitutional guarantee of equal rights and Muslim Personal Law are addressed, and it is the courts, rather than any cultural/religious body claiming to speak for the community, that have the ultimate authority, according to Flavia Agnes, an Indian women's rights lawyer and social activist, who in a June 2009 interview with the *Pakistan Christian Post*, added that "of late the courts have passed several pro-women judgments based on that authority" (Sikand "Flavia Agnes").¹²

The legal situation is complicated enough for Muslim women, but these complications are compounded by the tendency of Hindu communalist groups to use these laws as an excuse to argue for the end of

State-endorsed religious tolerance, an end to the secular nationalist ideals that underpin the Constitution, and to call for the construction and implementation of a uniform civil code for all Indians grounded in Hindu cultural practices and religious beliefs. In terms of the attack on secularism by the Hindu Right, the situation of Muslim women is made to function as a supposed signifier of Muslim backwardness. Under the cover of equality, Hindutva forces deride Islam as a foreign faith and proclaim Muslims outsiders in their own land. The fact that Hindu fundamentalism is using old European imperialist tactics in its campaign to denounce Muslim men under the guise of saving their women seems to have been forgotten in the storm of outrage that it has generated. Revealing these motives as questionable, Barbara Metcalf writes: “The need to be vigilant about unconscious prejudice and ill-formed stereotypes about Muslims is critical in today’s world, not least in India . . . where tragic episodes of anti-Muslim violence have taken place since Independence in 1947. . . . As colonial authorities did before them, today media and ordinary people alike obscure gender issues that affect women of their own community by focusing on those of others and believe that in so doing they have shown their own superiority” (Metcalf “India in Transition”). Clearly, far from being marginal, Muslim women in twenty-first century India are at the centre of current debates regarding Indian identity.

The image of the Muslim woman functions as a hub around which often dangerous politics circle. Given that Hussain’s *Purdah and Polygamy* describes in acute and energetic detail the everyday realities of a series of interconnected families of Muslim women, I think that the novel continues to be relevant today and so deserves a new audience. Since India’s nationalist ideal of secularism seems to be on the run from these new forms of religious fundamentalism, it is an appropriate moment to be reminded about the history of women’s resistance to fundamentalism and their opposition to forms of communalism that would confine them and their daughters, sisters, and mothers within categories best conducive to patriarchal control and would seek to use them as justifications for violence.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Perspectives on South Asia at the Threshold of the 21st Century*, edited by Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay and published by the Canadian Asian Studies Association (CASA), 1997. I would like to thank the editor and CASA for permission to reprint material from that essay. My gratitude also goes out to Nazia Akhtar and Nandi Bhatia for reading various drafts of this essay and offering their helpful comments.

2. See Sumit Sarkar’s “The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*,” which makes a compelling case for differentiating between the

first few volumes and the more recent ones.

3. Sharankumar Limbale's 2004 *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* is a significant contribution to this relatively new field of literary studies.

4. *Both Women Writing in India*, edited by K. Lalita and Susie Tharu, and *Women's Voices*, edited by Eunice De Souza and Lindsay Pereira, are fine examples of this important recovery work.

5. A recent example of this blinkered view is Amit Chaudhuri's 2004 anthology, *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Literature*, which contains very few non-Hindu or women writers generally and none from before Indian independence in 1947.

6. In her 2013 book *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, Rosemary Marangoly George argues that this persistent focus by postcolonial critics on literary texts by elite and primarily Hindu upper-caste Indian authors is the outcome of an insufficiently recognized alliance between such critics and the nationalist middle-class. She writes: "By the late 1980s, when west-based postcolonial literary critics began attending to Indian literature . . . they unwittingly reproduced the elite Indian investment in a modern, nation-centric, secular discussion of Indian writing in English. In doing so, postcolonial criticism became and remains woefully unaware of how much it has taken its cue from the upper-class, upper-caste Indian literary discourses that have deliberately and firmly eschewed all literary texts that are not nation-centric in orientation as irresponsible and unworthy of serious consideration . . . in focusing primarily on the national arena in its consideration of Indian (and other postcolonial) literature, postcolonial criticism has elevated this one theme over other subtler motivations to write and has also, perhaps unintentionally, adopted the mindset of the most elite of Indian colonial subjects for whom the ideas of national identity and subjecthood measured in terms of national sovereignty were central to their understanding of the function of literature" (2-3). Interestingly, however, though she is critical of this focus on nationalism in Indian fiction, George herself replicates the effect of such an emphasis when she chooses to devote one chapter each to novels written during the colonial period by R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, whom, along with Raja Rao, she later identifies as "the three patriarchs of Indian writing in English" (95).

7. Jessica Berman makes a similar point in the footnotes to her chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, where she examines Hussain's novel in terms of its contribution to discourses of modernity in late colonial India. She notes that: "Despite the enormous recent increase in critical writing on Indian literature, little attention has been paid to women writers of imaginative literature in the period 1900 to 1947," and

in a later footnote she adds that “[t]hrough Oxford University Press has reprinted a laudable number of women’s texts in their Oxford India Paperbacks series, very few women writers from the first half of the twentieth century appear” (225).

8. For an analysis of this shift in the women’s movement toward the end of the colonial era, see my “Charting the Anger of Indian Women Through Narayan’s Savitri”.

9. For analyses of Jahan’s and Chughtai’s pre- and post-independent writing in Urdu, see Priyamvada Gopal’s *Literary Radicalism in India* and Nandi Bhatia’s *Performing Women/Performing Womanhood*.

10. See, for example, the two volumes of selected writing by women entitled *Women Writing in India*, edited by K. Lalita and Susie Tharu, *Women’s Voices*, edited by Eunice de Souza and Lindsay Pereira as well as *The Sattianadhan Family Album: Miscellaneous Writings of the Members of the Sattianadhan Family*, again edited by de Souza and which contains many texts by the women of this family. Oxford India has also published two novels by the pre-independence writer, Swarnakumari Debi, including *The Uprooted Vine* and *An Unfinished Song*.

11. This interpretation of the colonial practice of purdah as primarily an expression of elite class status for both Hindu and Muslim families is explored in Minault’s *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* and Laura Weinstein’s “Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II’s Photographs of Women in *Purdah*.” Historical and regional specificity is important in any discussion of purdah, since it is a variable practice the meaning of which is conceived of differently at different times and places. For instance, Hanna Papanek’s study of purdah customs in post-independence 1960s and 1970s Karachi, Pakistan brought her to the conclusion that “purdah is perceived by many people as a signal of at least lower middle class status” (43).

12. For more on this controversial issue of Muslim Personal Law, see web essays by Asghar Ali Engineer and Purushottam Bilimoria as well as Yoginder Sikand’s interview with Parveen Abidi and two articles in the online magazine *India Together* by Puja Awasthi and Ranjit Devraj.

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