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IN THE THROES OF TRANSITION: MUSLIM WOMEN IN AHMED ALI'S *TWILIGHT IN DELHI* AND ZEENUTH FUTEHALLY'S *ZOHRA*

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ABSTRACT

The institution of *purdah*, a salient feature of Muslim culture and tradition, has, apart from its sartorial dimension, a metaphorical signification as well, manifested in the insistence on feminine modesty, the enslavement of the woman to custom and tradition, the concepts of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (dishonour) and the fettering of female sexuality. The life of the Indian Muslim woman behind the *purdah* in the period of the British colonial rule and the nationalist movement has been sensitively and realistically portrayed in regional as well as Indian English fiction. This paper takes up for analysis the fictional representation of Indian Muslim life behind the *purdah* in two Indian English novels, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951). *Purdah* in these novels becomes a symbol of the oppressive hold of tradition on a Muslim woman's life in a patriarchal/feudal society. While Ahmed Ali depicts his women as showing a passive acceptance of and resignation to a life of confinement behind the *purdah*, Zeenuth Futehally captures the conflicts and turmoil in the mind of a young Muslim woman, caught between the forces of tradition and modernity. The demands of duty and moral obligation to the family conflict with the liberating ideals ushered in by western education and the Nationalist movement in the life of the Muslim woman Futehally portrays.

Keywords: Muslim, *purdah*, *zenana*

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The Indian Muslim tradition is a compound of diverse cultural strands – the Persian, Arabic, Mughal and even the Hindu go into its making. To this cultural complex another influence was added since the latter half of the nineteenth century – the Western influence. The interplay of the East and the West, with their antithetical values, ruffled the interiors of many a Muslim home. Caught in the throes of transition, the Muslim women slowly and hesitantly drifted towards the realization of subject hood.

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951), Mumtaz Shah Nawaz' *The Heart Divided* (1957) and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) are novels that depict Muslim life and attitude in the India of the early twentieth century. The novels, in fact, represent different phases in the

evolution of the Indian Muslim woman from a life of contentment behind the *pardah* and the high walls of tradition through an agonizing realization of the injustices inherent in the institution to the final breaking away. Placed precariously, as they are, at the interface of tradition and modernity, the lives of the young Muslim women in *Zohra*, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and *The Heart Divided* are conflict-ridden. By contrast, the Muslim women in *Twilight in Delhi*, both young and old, are cocooned within their private space; the Freedom Movement, the Western influence and the concomitant ideas of individual liberty do not invade their quiet lives. This paper takes up for close analysis the life of the Muslim women behind the *pardah* featured in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra*.

Twilight in Delhi captures Muslim social life in the Delhi of the early twentieth century. There are sad reminiscences of the days of Mughal glory and a smouldering rage at the injustices meted out to the Muslims following the Revolt of 1857. The novel shows an exclusive preoccupation with the Muslim community. The Muslim community Ali depicts is a closed world with its own customs and traditions. It has very little contact with the Indians of other faiths.

Against the background of changing social and political conditions, Ali features a Sayyid household that takes pride in its ancestry, for, the Sayyids are the direct descendants of the Prophet. Mir Nihal, the head of the household, is a wealthy patriarch with aristocratic habits. He, like many Muslims of his generation, bemoans the dissolution of Mughal grandeur and loathes the British, who are looked upon as destroyers of Islamic culture. At the same time he is not happy with the Nationalist Movement. He views his private world as the only haven for him and at least there he can reign over (Prasad 127).

Ali's is a male narrative; the women play only secondary roles, as appendages to the male. The women are seen as possessions rather than individuals. "The pigeons caged by Mir Nihal are almost symbolic of the women who waste their lives out in the *zenana*" (Begum 213). The womenfolk, of the first and second generations, complacently carry on their walled existence within the *zenana* (the female quarters of the Muslim household) unmindful of the social and political changes in the world outside:

Mostly life stayed like water in a pond with nothing to break the monotony of its static life. Walls stood surrounding them on all sides, shutting the women in from the prying eyes of men, guarding their beauty and virtue with the millions of their bricks. The world lived and died, things happened, events took place but all this did not disturb the equanimity of the *zenana*, which had its world too where the pale and fragile beauties of the hothouse lived secluded from all outside harm, the storms that blow in the world of men (39-40).

Interestingly the women do not find *zenana* life monotonous. Cooking, dyeing dopattas and gossiping are the major activities in the *zenana*. The social and religious ceremonies and festivals brighten their lives and the petty quarrels and rivalries enliven their world.

Kalpna Bardhan observes that the status accorded to women in India and the behaviour expected of them vary within the family by age, marital and filial relations (167). As a wife, the woman is under the control of her conjugal family, ideally self-effacing and obedient. The older women, on the other hand, enjoy greater power and authority though not autonomy. They have a say in their children's marriage. Begum Nihal wields considerable power in familial matters like fixing marriages. "For, though women hold a subordinate position in Indian life yet in certain matters they can take the law in their hands, and marriage is one of them" (72). But while Begum Nihal manages to win her husband's permission for her son's marriage to a girl of a lower class family, she can do nothing to save her daughter from a bad match.

In a gender-segregated society a girl's socialization takes place mostly among women. Mothers bring up their daughters in conformity with the traditional ideal of Muslim womanhood. Daughters are trained to play the role of the perfect housewife. Bilqeece's education is mostly religious; she is allowed very limited pleasures and is taught the arts of cooking and sewing. "Even in her childhood she had not been allowed to keep her head uncovered. She had been constantly told that one day she would have to go away to someone else's house, and that she must always behave properly" (188). Girls "were never consulted about their own marriages and were given away to any man their parents selected" (195). True to their upbringing, MehroZamani and Bilqeece uncomplainingly fulfil their roles as passive, selfless and subservient wives.

MehroZamani accepts her marriage to the old and disfigured Meraj as her kismet. Bilqeece looks upon her husband as lord and master and suffers in silence when he grows cold towards her.

Ali draws attention to the Muslim society's deviation from Islamic principles and its maintenance of double standards. Islam permitted the widow to marry again: "When they have fulfilled their term, there is no blame on you if they dispose of themselves in a just and reasonable manner" (*The Quran* 2.234). Islam encouraged marriage with widows. The Prophet married mostly widows to set an example for others. However, the Indian "social code, derived mostly from prevailing Hindu practices, did not favour a second marriage" (36). Not just that a widow is not allowed to rebuild her life, but she also has to bear the blame for an early widowhood. The life of a widow is full of hardships and misery. She is expected to lead a life of self-abnegation, as does Begum Waheed in the novel. The male hegemonic society, however, places no restrictions on a widower. Asghar develops an interest in Bilqeece's sister and has plans of remarrying hardly six months after Bilqeece's death. Shams, Nihal's son, flirts with the young maidservant after his wife's death.

Ali touches upon different aspects of *zenana* life. The hunch-backed aunt, who leads a lonely life, having been abandoned by her husband, represents the unhappiness of *zenana* life. The superstitious beliefs and practices are presented through Begam Shahbaz Beg. She brings her daughter charms and amulets from Pirji to win back her husband's love. The jealousies and machinations of the *zenana* women are captured through the character of Begam Jamal. Ali is sympathetic to the *zenana* women but his portrayal is largely stereotypical. The women cannot conceive of a life outside the *zenana*; they find fulfilment in serving the male. Interestingly, Ali's men too are preoccupied with their private lives and remain unconcerned about the historical and political movements. The older generation, represented by Mir Nihal, feels out of key with the new pattern of life. A sense of defeat, purposelessness and futility overpowers Mir Nihal with the death of his mistress. To add to his despair, he hears of plans for the construction of a new Delhi, which would mean the annihilation of the old culture:

Her language, on which Delhi had prided herself, would become adulterated and impure, and would lose its beauty and uniqueness of idiom. She would become the city of the dead, inhabited by people who would have no love for her or any associations with her history and ancient splendour. (206)

Nihal recedes more and more into his private world. "His days had gone, and a new era of hopes and aspirations, which he neither understood nor sympathized with, was beginning to dawn. His world had fallen. Let others build their own" (250-51). Asghar, representing the new generation, is also little concerned about the political fate of his country. His adoption of Western ways is superficial. However, his imposition of the same on his wife puts the latter under emotional stress. The pair of English shoes Bilqeece is made to wear at Asghar's insistence makes her a laughing stock among the women.

The narrative is not merely a portrait of an individual or a family but of a city, the decay of its centuries-old culture. Writing of a culture he was rooted in, Ali paints the picture of decay with admirable sensitivity. The Delhi of the novel is a pale shadow of its old self. "No king lives there today, and the poets are feeling the lack of patronage; and the old inhabitants, though still alive, have lost their pride and grandeur under a foreign yoke" (2). The daughters and granddaughters of Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal Emperor, have fallen into destitution. The descriptions of pigeon flying and kite flying, the pastimes of the decadent aristocracy, evoke the days of Mughal glory. The omniscient narration suits Ali's purpose of social documentation.

Zeenuth Futehally's portrayal of the Muslim woman has greater complexity. She captures the longings and frustrations of Zohra, a sensitive girl who grows up behind the *purdah* in an aristocratic Muslim family of Hyderabad in the early years of the twentieth century. The progressive ideas from the West and the liberating ideals of nationalism have infected the thought process of this shy but perceptive girl whose abiding sense of loyalty and obligation to the family and elders smother her urge to rebel.

The Nawab, Zohra's father, embodies the benevolence of the feudal aristocracy. Several impecunious poets receive his munificent patronage. He inculcates in Zohra a passionate interest in Persian and Urdu poetry and a deep love of the mysticism of Sufi saints; he even dreams of her growing up into a scholar of Persian literature. He is also receptive of the tides of modernity ushered in by Western education. He gives his

daughter English education in accordance with the spirit of the time. He considers English education “the gateway to modern thought. All educated men want their wives to speak it like memsahebs, gitter-pitter” (14). The Nawab’s wife does not share his progressive ideas. She disapproves of higher education for girls and is censorious of her husband’s indulgence of Zohra: “But some day she will have to marry and why sow discontent in her heart? She may never then willingly settle down to domesticity. Allah forbid, but she has not to pass any Doctorate, has she?” (13) Her views on female education are hardly different from those of Unnie, the wet-nurse:

What is all this new learning for? [...] What do you want to do with firangi books? Learning is like chewing iron grams. Were your grandmother [...] alive, she would never have allowed you to delve into such books. Isn’t our own learning enough for you? And as for your high spirits, she would have made you sit down with a tray of mixed rice and dal and separate the grains. That was how girls were disciplined in our days. NawabSaheb [...] has spoiled you as if you were a son (2-3).

Begum Nawab, like Begum Nihal in *Twilight in Delhi* internalizes and perpetuates the patriarchal code that keeps women domesticated. Nevertheless, she is a strong woman. She manages the finances, insists on her husband bringing the accounts of the estate to her and curbs his extravagant ways.

In *Zohra* women are the uncompromising enforcers of *purdah* rules. The woman’s physical space is strictly confined within the four walls of the *zenana*. Even strolling in the outer garden, though high-walled, invites the elders’ disapproval. Women go out rarely. When they do, they travel in closed cars and carriages and board and alight at the *zenana* door. Women’s garments are not given to the tailor, but are stitched at home. Zohra is chaperoned to school. At home she takes her lessons in Arabic from a young man; the teacher and the student sit separated by a curtain.

Futehally deserves commendation for her graphic and sensitive portrayal of *zenana* life. The joys and sorrows of the secluded women and their daily activities, concerns and preoccupations – the negotiations for the marriage of the daughters, the festivities associated with marriage and childbirth, the rituals, customs and superstitious beliefs – are intimately portrayed. The wish for a son is so intense among the women that Zohra’s mother makes a generous-hearted entreaty to her husband to contract a second marriage: “Let me arrange such a marriage, NawabSaheb, a wife who will be a younger sister to me. Your son will then be my son too” (15).

Polygamous relationships were quite common among the Nawabs. The Quran sanctions polygamy: “If you fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or, three, or four” (4.3). However, it also puts a rider to such permission by making it conditional upon the men doing justice among the wives: “but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one” (4.3). The Quran also maintains that equal treatment of all the wives is humanly impossible: “Ye are never able to do justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire” (4.129). Through the description of the marital life of Zohra’s father-in-law, Futehally argues against the practice of polygamy. The poor man finds it difficult to hold the scales evenly between his two wives:

It seemed to him a superhuman task [...] he was torn between rival loyalties. His first wife he still loved, whilst his second’s temper he feared; but with the latter was the bond of children. Which of them should he choose? [...] as the tension became more and more acute, he retired to a life of complete asceticism (125-26).

Futehally excuses the quarrelsome and domineering ways of Zohra’s mother-in-law as being the upshot of the frustration of a proud woman, who at a young age was married to a middle aged man for the express purpose of bearing his children while the first wife continued to be foremost in his affections. “Within that stern exterior, what hopes lay buried, what passions lay smouldering,” wonders Zohra (142).

The customs that regulate the life of the *zenana* women are manifold. Zohra’s mother and mother-in-law stick to the rigid observance of the customs, most of which have no precedent in Islam. Zohra’s mother-in-law insists on her chewing paan, for, “it is not customary for brides to have pale lips” (75). A new bride “must always look decorative” (81). Married women should wear glass bangles and should not dress themselves in white. Bare wrists signify widowhood and white, being the traditional colour for the widow, has an inauspicious

association. The belief that unmarried girls and widows should not adorn themselves underscores the patriarchal concept that the woman is solely an object of male gaze. A new bride is not expected "to make any gesture of welcome to her husband in the presence of the elders" (81). In fact, any display of affection between the husband and the wife before the elders is considered vulgar and immodest. Such customs, conventions and taboos hamper a healthy companionship between the spouses. The wife looks upon her husband in reverential awe and maintains a bashful distance from him.

The petty jealousies and rivalries in the world of the maidservants, their chatter, love of gossip and flattery of and devotion to their mistresses are related with a loving tenderness. Unnie's age and status as the mistress' nurse bestow on her a position of prominence, akin to the one enjoyed by HakimanBua in AttiaHosain's novel. Zohra treats Unnie with courtesy and reverence. Conscious of her power, Unnie bosses over the young maids, much to the latter's annoyance. Gulab, who peeps into the men's quarters and keeps her friends amused with funny imitations of Unnie's strut and imperious manner, is an interesting representative of the fun-loving young maids, who resent the restrictions on their freedom and breach them on the sly.

The confining spaces are not just physical but also ideological. *Purdah* is a powerful ideology through the workings of which the social construction of gender takes place. *Purdah* concretizes the feminine code of modesty in tradition-bound Muslim cultures. In Zohra's family, marriage is considered the be-all and end-all of a Muslim girl's life. Still girls are forbidden from discussing the topic with the elders or even among themselves. "Convention held such talks to be immodest" (30). Zohra, though eager, is too embarrassed to ask her sister about her married life. Her parents seek her consent for her marriage, not directly, but through her cousin, Rashedah. Modesty is a much-vaunted virtue in a bride. When asked her consent for the marriage, a bride should not "show unseemly eagerness by replying with immodest haste" (55). Zohra's hands are slightly bruised when bangles are put on them; however, she suppresses all cries of pain in the presence of her *susral*. AttiaHosain in her novel, *The Sunlight on a Broken Column*, also records the instance of a bride who does not stir even when a centipede buries itself in her foot. Hosain's protagonist finds such behaviour preposterous. Futehally, by contrast, idealizes her heroine's faithful observance of the code of modesty, suppressing her resentment. She makes other characters praise Zohra's modesty. Unnie, the wet nurse, reflects: "Modesty is the greatest ornament of youth, and our Chhoti Begum was the image of modesty!" (299).

Purdah operates not just in relations between men and women; it also signifies respectful relations among the women themselves. Zohra sits at a respectful distance from her mother-in-law and does not express her wishes, interests or choices in the latter's presence. The life of a newly married girl is hemmed in by countless restrictions imposed in the name of modesty. She has to sit at home "like a show-window model", adorned in gaudy clothes and glittering jewellery, for streaming visitors to gaze at (83). Zohra's mother-in-law is flabbergasted when her English-educated son wants to take Zohra out to meet his friends: "This is the good that has come out of your English education [...] Ai-hai, young people have no sense of modesty left. Whoever heard of a couple, married hardly a week, going about together, visiting people!" (Zohra 81-82).

Zohra's education and her sensibility set her apart from the other women of her family. She strikes a contrast to her vain, self-indulgent sister, Mehrunnissa, who enjoys being the object of admiration. She romanticizes marriages of free choice and looks upon the system of arranged marriage as an epitaph to individual liberty. The author speaks of Zohra as being infused with a rebellious spirit, which she says, distinguishes her from the other English educated Hyderabad girls who express no objection to a marriage arranged by their parents. Rushed into a marriage against her will, Zohra toys with the idea of rebellion. She even plans to run away. However, she soon abandons the plan and resigns herself to the idea of marriage: "I must make this marriage successful. There is no retreat; Allah forbid that I should bring shame upon my parents and upon myself by returning to my maika, disapproved. I would rather die than bring such shame upon the family" (52). Familial obligations supersede Zohra's personal preferences. Except for a few indignant outbursts against the feudal society's curtailment of individual freedom, especially in the choice of a marriage partner, Zohra hardly strikes the reader as a rebel.

Zohra epitomizes the traditional Indian virtues of duty, obedience and deference to the elders. "I think one does owe one's parents a great deal" (84). To humour her mother-in-law she wears rich clothes and chews *paan*. "She had no say even in the selection of wearing apparel yet, and the mother-in-law often chose the wrong combination of colours which hurt Zohra's aesthetic sense. But she wore the clothes without a murmur" (Zohra 79). She longs for the 'freedom' of her home, away from the stifling atmosphere of formality at her husband's; but she desists from criticising her in-laws and stops Unnie from doing so: "Different households have different ways" (80). With her dutiful devotion she gradually wins her mother-in-law's love and approval. It is Zohra's point of view that Futehally endorses. Bashir, Zohra's husband, who scoffs at tradition, does not enjoy the author's sympathy.

Marriage extends the boundaries of Zohra's world to a certain extent. Her Western educated husband brings her out of the *purdah*. "From a life of seclusion I have been thrust into a world utterly new and bewildering to me" (107). Zohra gets an opportunity to mingle with men outside her immediate circle of kinship. Having led a life of seclusion she has little insight into the nature of men. She cannot help being affected by Siraj's youthful charm, a sharp contrast to her husband's seriousness. It is a feeling of righteousness that prevents her from letting the relationship go too far. Despite his talk of progressivism Bashir is paternalistic in his treatment of Zohra. With his scientific bent of mind, Bashir fails to appreciate Zohra's poetic and aesthetic sensibility and her sensitive nature. He looks down upon mysticism and spirituality whereas Zohra sees in them a craving for a nobler life. The disparity in their temperament becomes more and more glaring with the passing of years. "But you frighten me sometimes [...]. I feel that were it possible, you would place even a lovely sunset on the dissecting table and not feel it a desecration!" (94). She tries to find fulfilment in motherhood. The enlightened and democratic atmosphere of Zohra's parental home is sadly missing in her conjugal family. Zohra misses her literary discussions with her father and the *mushaeras* the Nawab frequently held in his home. Knowing her husband's contempt for poets and poetry Zohra is ashamed to put down the verses that form themselves in her imagination.

The novel makes a plea against the institution of arranged marriage, which is the norm in *purdah* societies. *Purdah* and the notion of modesty make it easier for parents to select 'suitable' grooms for their daughters without having to heed the 'emotional' counsel of youth. Zohra comments ironically on the complementarity of the two institutions: "The *purdah* system is a great saviour [...]. This mode of marriage can hold good only in a *zenana* society, where there are no standards of comparison. Difficulties would arise if the girls started moving about in mixed circles" (239).

Zohra's dislike of arranged marriages springs from her notions of romantic love picked up from the sentimental novels and love lyrics she is fed on and the Western education she receives. She remains true to Bashir out of a sense of wifely duty. Her love for Bashir, though calm and unwavering, leaves the depth of her nature unstirred. However, there is a semblance of happiness, which is shattered when she gets to know Hamid, her brother-in-law. The two have many common tastes and interests – an unmingled admiration for Gandhiji and his ideals, a fascination for hand spun clothes, love of art and poetry, aversion to material pleasures, belief in mysticism and spirituality and pride in India's cultural heritage. She finds in Hamid the embodiment of all her dreams and ideals. She does not feel guilty about her love for Hamid, for, her conception of love is idealistic, a sort of spiritual communion, untainted by physical desire. Love "is more a quality of the mind; it is the stirring of one's imagination; it is the fulfilment of one's spiritual self" (249).

The impossibility of a life with Hamid plunges Zohra into an abyss of despair and disillusionment. While Hamid attains self-gratification through his passionate involvement in Gandhiji's Civil Disobedience Movement, Zohra wallows in self-pity. "Hamid at least had done something, achieved something, while she [...]. But she was only a woman" (269). With her profound admiration for Gandhiji she would like to be a part of the Movement, but she dare not even breathe a word to her husband. Her efforts to pull herself out of the slough of despair end up futile. Her brush with the European culture and its libertine ways and her (superficial) acceptance of the European life style – she sheds her inhibitions, smokes, drinks champagne, dresses herself up gaudily, dances with men and mixes freely with them – only serve to add to her disillusionment and deepen her respect for tradition. She repents her behaviour: "The things she had done [...] were perhaps suitable for

those who were brought up to them, but she could not fit into that pattern, and remain carefree" (285). She tries to devote her life to the service of the poor. In the attempt to rescue a plague-stricken family she contracts the illness. "Her protracted death-scene is the culmination of sentimentality in a novel shaped by a decadent literary convention that the beloved is unattainable" (Mukherjee 56). Despite the author's claims to the contrary, Zohra appears more maudlin than rebellious.

Zohra's character does not register growth or change. She remains the same romantic idealist all through her life unlike AttiaHosain's Laila who grows and matures thanks to the multifarious influences she is exposed to. Marriage interferes with Zohra's studies and her only windows to the world outside are the books, which she reads avidly. The Muslim society of Hyderabad is presented as being slow to change. The aristocracy lives in a world of its own unperturbed by the social movements. Hamid's mother reprimands him for getting keyed up about Gandhi's Satyagraha: "What have we in Hyderabad got to do with it?" (220). Hamid himself dithers for long before he makes up his mind about joining the Movement: "I had been thinking about what my duty was, whether even though I am a Hyderabad, I should not go and join the Satyagraha Movement" (259).

Purdah is more rigidly enforced in Hyderabad than in a city like Bombay. From the vignettes of Muslim life in Bombay that Futehally sketches, we learn that Muslim women enjoy greater freedom of movement there. In the cinemas of Bombay there are no *zenana* sections segregating women. Women shop on their own without male escort. In Hyderabad the life of an upper class Muslim woman is shackled in many ways. Zohra has very little options to fill the void in her life. She cannot take up a job, for, in Hyderabad professional careers are forbidden to women of aristocratic families. Her idea of social work does not concur with that of her ambitious husband, who looks upon it as a means to win honour and prestige. "Even if she did something, it had to be trumpeted about, though discreetly, to gain applause. She bore his name" (286). As her husband scales heights in his career, Zohra feels more and more bored, lonely, depressed and deprived. What infuses fire into her spirit is her belief in the ideal of romantic love, for the sake of which she is even willing to forsake her family. Hamid who knows that "love will not be satisfied with mere poetic imaginings" implores Zohra to keep up appearances and stay with Bashir rather than plunge her family into agony and desolation (263). With the frustration of her romantic ideal there is nothing else to hold her on to life. The last pages of the novel are marred by excessive sentimentality.

Futehally idealizes the character of Zohra. All the characters in the novel speak of her in glowing terms. Hamid finds her blemishless: "There is something in her so fresh and naïve. Her manner and gestures are exquisite, and she moves gracefully. There is really nothing discordant about her. Even her voice is soft" (156). Zohra does not speak a word to Safiya about her husband Yusuf's wantonness and silently puts up with Yusuf's insinuations and Safiya's barbs. Safiya's misunderstanding, her callous treatment of Zohra and her final repentance serve to glorify Zohra's virtues. Safiya is remorse stricken and implores Hamid: "I misjudged her [...] Bhaijan, ask her to forgive me [...] Otherwise my soul would suffer eternal damnation. She is a saint. Yes, now I know she is a saint [...]" (303). As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes: "There is no irony in the treatment of Zohra." The author expects the reader to have complete empathy with her (56).

The representatives of 'liberated' womanhood in the novel – Safiya and JehanAra Begum are negatively portrayed. Safiya's husband brings her out of the *purdah*. She plays tennis and rides horses. However, she appears pathetic in her effort to live up to her dashing husband's standards of stylishness. She is extravagant, fashionable and frivolous. JehanAra Begum hails from a family that discarded the *purdah* long ago. Voluptuous and flirtatious, she looks upon motherhood as a burden and neglects her duties as a mother: "One has also to consider one's figure" (95). It is obvious that the author looks down upon these women.

Futehally's portrayal of the feudal aristocracy of Hyderabad is poetic and authentic. The dignity and decorum, passion and poetry in the world of the Nawabs are depicted along with its fettering conventionality. The ornate prose embellished with copious allusions to Urdu and Persian poetry is in harmony with the richness of the culture portrayed.

The life of the Muslim woman behind the *purdah* becomes a saga of deprivation and suffering, whether it be in Delhi or Hyderabad. As we progress through the novels, we witness a gradual opening up of

the Muslim woman's world. The upper class Muslim society of Delhi, Ahmed Ali features, is indifferent to the tides of change that are in the air and keeps its women in strict confinement. Trained to be obedient, dutiful and self-effacing, the Muslim women in Ahmed Ali's novel accept their sufferings and deprivations stoically. The idea of rebellion does not even occur to them. As regards the feudal aristocracy of Hyderabad, portrayed in *Zohra*, the male members are receptive of the progressive socio-political changes; it is the women who zealously guard their private worlds. Still, the benefits of progressive changes gradually percolate to the young women and they long for the broadening of their physical and mental spaces.

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