Islamic Feminism and Questions of Sexualities on the Indian Subcontinent

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by

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To my parents

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Islamic Feminism and Questions of Sexualities on the Indian Subcontinent

This dissertation attempts to test the limits of intersectional feminism on the Indian subcontinent. I have looked at Islam from narratives of the fringes, where pre-modern/mythological and modern elements have coalesced to form a post-foundationalist Islamic critique of religious scriptures and law. The texts that I have chosen (*Rekhti* poetry, Chughtai's *Lihaf* and The Crooked Line, Nighat gandhi's *Alternative realities: Love in the Lives of Muslim Women* to name some*)* are chronologically placed and I have traced the slippages and ruptures where questions of female sexualities from an Islamic feminist point of view have become potent on the subcontinent. The theoretical discussions and conversations in between reveal the perennial tension with Islamic feminism in the academic sphere and the subsequent emergence of the term 'Neo-conservative' feminism. This dissertation also tries to bring into the sphere of literary writing other sociological realities and occurrences in current times, and finally to open up a discussion on the further scope of this study beyond the texts that it reads.

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Introduction

> If religion now “returns” to us, how does it come? Like a seasonal wind, erratic but awaited, that rattles locks and scorches unlucky skin?—or is religion a plague ever latent in imagined tropics, some venereal fever inevitably imported, to which our citizenry remains vulnerable in its naked innocence?—or is the religion that returns more particular, more like an exiled king, an Odysseus, forced to wander, fight other wars, suffer narcotic seductions, before returning home to discover a troop of courtiers ruining the palace? How do we imagine this religion that returns? And what does it discover when it comes home?(Jordan 39)

As Mark D. Jordan writes these lines in his essay, *The Return of Religion during the Reign of Sexuality*, we too wonder about the repercussions of bringing religion into feminist studies.

How can one define religion? The term came into existence at a certain time for a certain purpose, and its meaning has changed significantly over the years. Although it may have been tempting to regard major concepts such as religion, to exist as some entity that is universal and applicable in all times and places, they are, in fact, historically conditioned and depend on particular circumstances. We cannot understand religion in a timeless sense. Religion can be understood only with respect to context.(Ernst 38) Feminist studies in religion has its roots in the second wave feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s. It instigated a new critical engagement with religion which helped in shaping a substantial literature on women and gender in religion. The efforts to develop postpatriarchal (re) interpretations of religious texts, traditions, practices, representations and histories were especially formative through the mid-1990s. It has helped flourishing postmodern intellectual currents that shifted the essentialist understanding of feminism. Defining the scholarship as either religious/biased or secular/impartial fails to uphold core feminist epistemological insights. The secular-religious binary reinforces a false idea of religion as a reified and bounded thing in a presumably scientific rational world. Now, at the onset of this dissertation, I would like to clarify certain key points that will recur through my project and offer a self-reflexive declaration. I am aware that Islamic feminism is not the only or necessary framing for the convergence of Islam and feminism. I have found that any scholarship on Islam and feminism follows certain trajectories: first, any possibility of convergence between the two is denied and so the two are kept apart; Second, there is a convergence mooted unproblematically and named Islamic feminism; third, the ways in which this convergence is challenged, especially by those who resist the label of 'feminism'; fourth, a convergence is admitted by taking Islam for granted in pursuing a feminist analysis. The lines I would like to draw here connecting Islam and feminism will attempt to show that watertight distinctions are not possible and there are obvious overlaps and fissures, pointing to the complexity and diversity of gender analysis in Muslim women's scholarship on sex equality. I suggest that it is indeed possible to theorize sexual equality from alternative paradigms even as we work with feminist methodologies. Furthermore, I will suggest that we try to maintain a critical space between Islam and feminism so that their coming together recognizes the different and specific histories and politics of each. More generally, I am arguing for an approach that values and maintains difference in feminist endeavour through an examination of texts and critical ideas that speak to the notion of an Islamic feminism in various, and often contentious, ways.

'How is this research going to be different?' is the question I should be answering at the beginning. The field I have attempted to explore is mined with contestations and obscured by queries. The chapters seek if anything to de-substantiate our settled certainties about the opposition of religion and sexuality studies. What concerns me most is how the narratives of democracy and its conjoined counterpart secular-liberal politics have imbibed Euro-American ambition to remake Muslims and Islam. Calls for the reformation of Islam, now issued from progressive, liberal, and conservative podiums alike, are automatically tied to its oppression of women. What we need is a critique of secular-liberal politics that has silenced voices in the name of emancipation. This research brings in the uneasy question of religion into intersectional feminism that exclusively focuses on the question of sexuality in the Indian subcontinent. Before getting into the nuances of it, I must clarify what I mean by 'sexuality'. Sexuality is not merely a loaded term, it is preeminently ambiguous. It is a signifier with numerous, sometimes contradictory referents. It can be used to mean a biological given, whether a propensity or a drive; it may refer to individuals or groups; it may refer to "unconscious" or conscious impulses; it may describe behaviour, whether indulged in, observed, desired, or related in narrative; it may be a concept in discourse that refers to some or all of the preceding definitions. The broadness of such a discursive concept may reflect the view that there is no verifiable reality beyond talk – that sexuality is best viewed as a social construct. "Sex" itself is similarly ambiguous. It can be seen as the biological "counterpoint" to socially constructed "gender," in which event either category could be and has been viewed as dependent on the other.

Initially, the main orientation of this work was to reclaim certain texts that I thought have been unfairly marginalized. I stumbled upon *rekhti* and its history in Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's *Same Sex Love in India: A Literary History*. I have always been fascinated by the figure of a courtesan. A woman in charge of her sexuality and possessing political agency and economic independence was something that helped me to look at *rekhti* in a different light. The more I moved towards the next century and into the muddled discussion of religion and expression of women's sexuality, the more disillusioned I was about the scope of Islamic feminism on the Indian subcontinent. The Colonial era saw the rise of women centric reform movements but hardly any literature of that period talked about women’s sexual culture in the way *Rekhti* did. Rokheye Sakhawat Hosain, Attiya Hosain, Qurratulain Hyder and so many other writers talked profusely about women’s empowerment but what I was looking for was the representation of female sexuality in an Islamic framework. Chughtai and Rashid Jahan did talk about female sexuality and I have placed their work along with the feminist alternative Qur’anic interpretation of female sexuality and women’s right to sexual pleasure. The image of Islam as a demonic religion, predisposed to maltreat the female sex, seems always to have existed. The relentless slandering of Islamic gender practices has been seen as a product of colonial way of looking at oriental sexuality. The over-emphasis on the role of colonialism is as inconclusive and debatable as the totalizing and universalizing approach to Islam that looks only to Qur'anic injunctions and shari'a laws to explain the surveillance of women in Islamic societies, disregarding the fact that Islam, like any other religion or ideology, has a contingent nature and is the product of its articulation within different indigenous cultures and societies. The spatio-temporal heterogeneity of Islam is usually grossly overlooked. The idea of Islam as a kind of meta-culture obscures the reality that, there are as many Islams as the conditions that sustain them.

What have I aimed for in these three chapters? In an exploratory nascent attempt, I have tried to look at Islam in an alternative light where various forms of Islam, (pre-modern, modern or any other) come together while forming an idea of Islam from the fringes. Now, what do I know about the lived experience of a Muslim woman on the subcontinent? As I have delved deeper into the narratives of women from different times, I have questioned myself about how much of lived experience and politics can be learnt by literature and recorded accounts and an abiding belief in intersectional feminism? I do not have a clear answer to this question and that might be counted as one of the limitations of this dissertation. The question of authenticity might arise because of my personal position as a non-Muslim in the discourse. In this debate, the question of ‘speaking for’ and ‘speaking about’ becomes pertinent—the issue of ‘re-presentation and representation’ comes up. How does one support the struggles of ‘others’ when one cannot claim a part in these struggles? How should any research honour the rights of people and groups to speak for themselves without delegitimizing the rights of others to speak?

I lack the lived experience. I approach the religious texts from the outside, from the feminist translations I could find, those that could possibly answer my queries about sexuality through the methodology of Islamic feminism. In short, this work can be seen as an outsider's take on Islamic feminism on the subcontinent. Marginality is not a homogeneous experience. As a middle class Dalit woman from Bengal who had the privilege of accessing higher education , I have perceived marginalization and caste based oppression differently. The problem is of cultural translation where ideas and experiences are translated among intellectual, geographic, and cultural spaces. But As Bakhtin would put it, 'outsideness' can play a powerful part in understanding a culture that is not one's own. The outsider's positionality can instigate new dialogic encounters that can open up new discussions in cultural studies. As Bakhtin talks of this encounter, he writes,

> There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture. This idea, as I have said, is one-sided. Of course, a certain entry as a living being into a foreign culture, the possibility of seeing the world through its eyes, is a necessary part of the process of understanding it; but if this were the only aspect of this understanding, *it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching.* Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, and in culture.(Bakhtin 6,7)

Spivak is one of the few Cultural Studies theorists to speak of translation from a practical as well as a theoretical point of view. She presents these ideas principally in

“The Politics of Translation” (1993), an article whose articulation of gender, culture and translation merits examination in some detail. Spivak begins by emphasizing that the “task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency” (Spivak 179). This agency is only partial, however, since the writer is always “written by her language,” because even in acting on it, intention “is not fully present to itself.” But the writer also “writes agency” in accordance with her ideological position. It seems appropriate to put Gayatri Spivak’s approach to language here, where she argues that translation must “respect the irreducibility of otherness . . . the liberal humanist ‘she is just like me’ position is not very helpful when translating.” Rather than sameness, the translator must seek ‘maximum distance.’ ”(Simon 183)

This research was born out of my quest to identify the limits of intersectional feminism. What do I mean by ‘limits of intersectionality’? As an avid feminist, I have always watched for lifestyles and choices that would not be considered ‘feminist’. Like any other discipline, the feminist academic/activistic sphere is popularly bound by certain parameters or ideologies that influence the subject’s life choices. Shilpa Phadke notes these prevalent anxieties in her ethnographic study among her students. “In Risking Feminism: Voices from the Classroom”, she deals with this constant paranoia among young scholars. A lot of scholars felt their heterosexual romances or religious beliefs or personal inability to stand up against conservative families became barriers in the way of their feminist politics. There is an increasing fear of getting tagged as a ‘bad feminist’ because of certain life choices, so much so that Roxane Gay and some others have published books on being a ‘Bad Feminist’[i]. I will end my digression here; the point I am trying to make is that I wanted to see for myself how the much-debated discussion of religion and sexuality can be fitted into the South-Asian feminist framework. Islamic feminism has been a widely discussed phenomenon since the emergence of the term in 1990s. It burst on the global scene especially in the light of the debate on showcasing religiosity in the public sphere. On the other hand, this debate is embedded in the wider discourses concerning women's rights and Islam, and the position of women in Muslim-majority societies as well as

Muslim women in societies where Muslim populations constitute a minority. To trace the progression of Islamic feminism requires one to look at the diverse settings and geographical scales. of the debate concerning the conception of ‘Islamic feminism’ and ‘Islamic feminists’; in national contexts of Morocco and Turkey; in the narration of committed Muslim women living in France and in Germany; in a university setting in Italy; and in critical engagement with scholarly texts on religion. The diversity of the sites has been chosen so as to illustrate some of the variety of ways in which patriarchy, along with other axis of domination, is being challenged in an Islamic framework. At the same time, the texts portray different ways of understanding what constitutes ‘Islamic feminism’ in the wider context of debates concerning gender and religiosity. The texts I have chosen to reflect on female sexuality in the subcontinent are not randomly selected. I have tried to look at the writing in this field with the changing political backdrop in mind. My first chapter is located in the tumultuous period when the debatable idea of modernity is setting in. The second chapter looks at the writings from colonial period and how some pre-modern liberal gender-fluid cultures are lost in the process and the third chapter explores the subcontinent in the aftermath of 9/11 and the demonic façade of Islam that has become its stereotypical image.

As Foucault writes in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, genealogy offers an alternative to the monolithic linear narrative of history. He writes, “However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is "something altogether different" behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. Examining the history of reason, he learns that it was born in an altogether "reasonable" fashion-from chance;” (Foucault 78) The chapters in this thesis are arranged in genealogical progression. Genealogy displaces the primacy of the subject found in conventional history and targets discourse, reason, rationality and certainty. It attempts to look for instances that are unrealized, absent and yet hold the possibility of meaning. There is no order in the way the question of sexuality in Indian subcontinent has evolved or changed over the centuries.

Why did I choose to place these texts chronologically?

First, each of my chapters attempts to lay down the time period against which the texts are placed and second, the texts I have discussed extensively in chapter one and two come to a full circle through the discussion between two Islamic feminists of twenty first century in the section called "*Siraat-e-Mustaqeem:*The Straight Path*"* from Nighat Gandhi's *Alternative Realities: Love in the Lives of Muslim Women*. The author, Nighat and Nusrat discuss the treatment of female sexual agency in literature starting from a pre-modern period. The texts they could remember are the texts that I deal with in my first two chapters. In the next section I will provide an outline of the three chapters that form the core of my dissertation.

Under what political social and historical contingencies were genders and sexualities constructed? How did specific colonial legal constraints and social mores affect sexual practices? If there was a shift from homosexual acts to homosexual persons, when did the shift occur? How was the shift transacted? Was it accompanied by an 'identity politics movement'? Were multiple discourses of sexuality in place during particular periods? What forms did these discourses take? How were they affected by race, class, ethnicity and gender? How were tradition and modernization understood? What was at stake in the production of both modernity and tradition? Given certain constructions of tradition and modernity, when sexual practices, behaviours, and representations fell into either or both camps? These are some of the questions I attempt to explore in the texts I read for this dissertation.

The first chapter of my dissertation begins by visiting what I mark as the originary text for my research, *Rekhti* poetry. The verses of *Rekhti* were the first primary source that I laid my hands on. For my lack of fluency in Urdu, I had to depend on Ruth Vanita's extensive work on *Rekhti*. She has placed the discussion of *Rekhti* in the backdrop of a city in transition. I read this significant literary work in conjunction with other socio-historical writings on that period, to unveil the politics of translation. The interstices between factual and fictional materials have been explored for their continuities and discrepancies.

One of my objectives in my second chapter is to demonstrate how Islam has been transformed through its own egalitarian tendencies, principles, articulations, and implications into a dynamic system with practices that fulfil its goals of justice, by first admitting that concepts of Islam and concepts of justice have always been relative to actual historical and cultural situations. This chapter revolves around the writings of Ismat Chughtai and Rashid Jahan that have explicated the question of sexuality in the colonial period. I have provided interpretations of Islamic religious texts that have captured an alternative reading of the Qur'an from pre-modern or sometimes oral traditions. The reason I put them together is because I wanted to trace a feminist retelling of Islam from the fringes. The characters I discuss here, Chughtai's Begum Jaan or Shaman, for example, reside on the outskirts of traditional Islam and have subverted and modified its norms

Throughout my third chapter, I have felt the need to talk about the growth of Islamic feminism. It was crucial for me to clarify the politics of Saba mahmood and Asma Barlas, both from Pakistan and yet never having written on the scope of Islamic feminism in South-Asia. Without exploring their trajectories of writing, the methodology of Lila Abu Lughod that I have adopted to look into the narratives provided by Nighat Gandhi would not have worked. The first part of this chapter includes looking at personal narratives of Islamic feminists to discuss the pedagogical anxiety and cracks within feminist academia. Thus the narratives are integral to what fuels, motivates, justifies and legitimates actions for rethinking the role of an Islamic feminist in relation to Islamic reform and activism. The role of theorization in this research is a dialectical process associated with the interpretive tradition. It is a curious fact that sexuality has rarely been a dominant theme in ethnographic research, despite strong interest in the subject on the part of some of anthropology's founding practitioners and a few of their descendants. There are obvious and not-so-obvious reasons for this reticence. One of them is the quite obvious fact that many people are discreet about the subject, that the information they provide may be unreliable, unrepresentative, or unverifiable. It moves between everyday lives and meanings, some personal accounts and feminist theories. As I moved chronologically into this domain and attempted to establish that Islamic feminism is at a nascent stage, the unease and anxiety of Islamic feminists became increasingly clear to me.

Islam is not a monolith. It has a plethora of meanings and experiences. Primarily I refer to subtle constructs of gender across a broad spectrum of epistemological possibilities and through formulations of fundamental ideas about the ontology of being in Islam. At the level of the average Muslim man or woman on the street, Islam is whatever they have inherited, culturally and ethnically. Since they are Muslim, they do Islam. Islam is not merely a religion. It is a holistic approach to the world characterized by a "unique" insistence upon itself as a coherent and closed system, a sociological and legally and even politically organized system in the mundane world. Leila Ahmed also refers in her memoirs to her inheritance of Islam as the upbringing by Muslim parents or in a Muslim cultural context. Here the emphasis is shifted to undefined qualities resulting from cultural experience whether or not they include aspects of volition regarding acceptance of definitions given to methods or conclusions of historical study. Cultural affiliations may not even be related to observation of religious rituals. (Wadud 2006: 19,20)

The pervasive question that has stayed with me throughout this dissertation is, how any author, believer, or audience negotiates between complex and contradictory meanings of Islam. The Qur'an has a specific context and the Qur'anic text is responsive to that context. But if one chooses, one can move beyond its particular linguistic confirmations and limitations in context and look through it as path towards transcendence-- towards new potential. Its words are signs, the point beyond them is the route towards transformation. It requires readers of these signs to invest their feminist agency to churn out the reappropriative meanings. The authors or theorists whose personal experience or politics I have discussed at length, are all part of a complex whole, in constant motion and manifestation that has changed over the centuries as I have tried to show in my three chapters. Women's readings of the Qur'an are either expected to be perfect and comprehensive, or they are inadequate. Therefore, rather than finding encouragement from others with prior privilege in engaging in textual analysis, they are castigated for their efforts at contributing, however inconclusively, to new understandings of the Qur'an. But as I conclude this section, I stop and ponder whether the subjective interpretive choice has to be to perfect. Why can someone's politics not be jaded and incomplete like the ideology is? All the main voices in this dissertation encourage a space that is incomplete, and yet to be formed fully but a space nonetheless, moving, raging and reclaiming.

Rekhti and the Literary Evidence of a Gender-Fluid Queer Culture

While until now, extensive research has been done in citing the history of *rekhti* and the impact it has had on the modern critics, I would attempt to break the sanctioned public silence on the gender-bending practices of colonial Awadh as reflected in *rekhti*. *Rekhti*, a type of Urdu poetry whose distinguishing features are a female speaker and a focus on women's lives and desires became notoriously connected with the transformation of *ghazal*[ii]. I have chosen this particular form of poetry because it blended beautifully the last vestiges of medieval freedom and the popularly assumed new voices of modernity that came with colonial rule. *Rekhti* is inseparable from *rekhta*[iii] because of their thematic overlapping but what marks the difference is its non-mystical, earthly valence. The verses written by Rangin, Insha, Qais, Jur'at, Jan sahib or Nisbat are ambiguous. These men with their knowledge of Persian and their closeness to court life, were at the top of linguistic/cultural hierarchy. Yet they adopted the language of the courtesans, language of the uneducated, rural poor and even language of Hindu courtiers who spoke the local language. Through their engagement with languages spoken by different communities, they celebrated hybridity that was reflected by the cosmopolitan spaces. They wrote in the voice of a woman speaker who is not interested in marriage or children, but in life's pleasures, and her status is blurred between *tawaif*[iv] or *sharif*[v]. The verses drew a plethora of responses from the contemporary readers and the critics and translators of the following generation.

Rekhti belongs to a curious genre of poetry in Urdu. Historically, the word has come to refer to a body of verse written in an exaggerated feminine voice, full of linguistic, social and bodily details specific to women, Written almost exclusively by men, its audience too has always been overwhelmingly male. Scholars of Urdu literature agree that the name *rekhti* was coined by the eighteenth-century poet Rangin (1755-1835) to designate certain verses that he wrote for the entertainment of his patron, Mirza Sulaiman Shikoh, a Mughal prince then living in exile in Lucknow. More telling, perhaps, was the title that he gave to that collection: *Angrekhta*[vi].The thematic contents of Rangin's 'aroused' verses may be summarized as follows: adulterous sex between men and women; sex between women; lustful women; quarrelsome women; jealous women; women's superstitions and rituals; women's exclusive bodily functions; women's clothes and jewellery; and a variety of mundane events in the domestic life of women. Claiming her pleasures and predilections, women in *rekhti* emerge as the figures of an indigenous modernity. It is difficult to pin down the inventor of *rekhti*. There are different schools and different traditions that produced *rekhti*. Sa'adat Yar Khan, Rangin(1755-1835) periodically earned his living as poet/courtier at various places. He eventually organized his copious writings into nine books, including two divans of conventional *ghazals*, one of heterosexually explicit verses, and a fourth of *rekhtis*. Rangin's close friend, Insha'u 'l-Lah Khan or Insha (1756-1817) was a polyglot and a multi-talented poet who also wrote many *Rekhtis*. In *Darya- e Latafat,* his delightful book on the Urdu language, Insha depicts an elderly poet from Delhi who decried the quality of local poets and poetry including the following on Rangin. Insha writes in *Darya-e Latafat* (in Ruth Vanita's translation),

> ...Because of his womanizing, Rangin became indecent and immoral. He abandoned *rekhta* and invented *rekhti*, so that decent men's daughters would read it, be attracted, and blacken their faces with him. (Vanita 8)

Urdu litterateurs label not only *rekhti* but these poets obscene, dirty and shameless and condemn the Nawabs as lovers of pleasure, lazy and given to effeminacy. The term *rekhti* may indeed have been coined by Rangin, but contrary to his and Insha's claims, the kind of verse it denoted was not his invention. Several poets had already written similar verses in Bijapur and Hyderabad. In fact Rangin may have come across their verse during his many travels or even while in Delhi, before his arrival in Lucknow around. Both Khalil Ahmad Siddiqi and Badi Husaini list several poets of the Deccan who preceded Rangin, and suggest that the verses of one of them, Muhammad Siddiq, Qais (1814?)—a slightly older contemporary of Rangin—could have provided the inspiration for Rangin's alleged invention.

My objective in this chapter is not to elucidate the content and history of *rekhti* and its authorship but to examine the translations and the deliberate changes that seem to have been enacted in translation. Several strategies are employed to privilege the heterosexual, and gender ambivalence is downplayed in the later translations. There is clearly a gendered politics of translation at work. Ruth Vanita in her note on the translation mentions this to be a product of colonial modernity. She writes,

> The British defeat of the 1857 rebels encouraged both victors and vanquished to believe that conquering cultures are superior to conquered ones. Many educated Indians tried to remake themselves simultaneously in the image of the conquerors and in that of an imagined purity drawn from remote pasts. (Vanita 24)

She takes 1857 as a watershed moment after which the convention of writing love poetry to and about young male was strategically denigrated. She treats colonial modernity as some sort of parameter that somehow changed the history of sexuality and the criticism of it. Modern colonial regimes are not self-evidently hegemonic, but are always in process, they are never fully or finally accomplished and must be conceived as 'unfinished business'. The presumption that the new gendered and sexualised orders are products of these regimes is precarious, however, and it is possible to counter Ruth Vanita's implicit understanding of sexual norms of colonial north-India. State and other social, political and cultural actors have limited capacity to fully contain or successfully change the domain of sexuality as evidenced by the mobility and recalcitrance of men's and women's desire. This chapter will thus be about sexuality and its capacity to interrupt, if not thwart completely, highly unstable modernizing regimes. *Rekhti* verses and the socio-historical account of agency ask us to trace the slippages and ruptures of colonial gender and sexual politics. When I posit socio-historical accounts of Awadh culture along with *Rekhti*, I intend to look at the difference of methodologies between them. The sociological writings help me prise open the cracks that are left behind by the politics of translation. Despite dealing with literature, Ruth Vanita falls back on factuality or the trap of mainstream historiography. Her reading of the city of Lucknow lacked the fluidity of multiple possibilities that *Rekhti* offers. Rekhti depicts a period that is simmering with gender-bending glamour. It gives us a chance to look at the onset of modernity at the line of religion and gender and opens up a discussion of pre-modern practice of Islam that lost its way in secular-liberal critical history.

One of the main concerns of the critics[vii] were, the exaggerated femininity of *rekhti*, the minute linguistic, social and bodily details specific to women were portrayed just to titiliate the male audience.(Naim 3) C.M Naim represents the mainstream criticism of *Rekhti* that has always looked at Rekhti as a product of male fantasy. He begins the essay "Transvestic Words?: The *Rekhti* in Urdu" by quoting Susanne Kappeler from *The Pornography of Representation*. She writes,

> The assumption of the female point of view and narrative voice—the assumption of linguistic and narrative female "subjectivity"—in no way lessens … the fundamental elision of the woman as subject. On the contrary, it goes one step further in the total objectification of woman. (Kappeler 90)

Critics suggest a complete detachment of women from Rekhti. They are dissociated from the language, from the transgressions that are recorded and they are not even considered as readers. C. M Naim suggests that there is no evidence of a female readership of *rekhti*. There is no written record that suggests that the *rekhti* was widely read by women, either of the upper classes or of the courtesan society. There is only a mention of three female *rekhti* poets and the history of that is not developed enough. He adds on a footnote,

> There is, to my knowledge, no written record that suggests that the Rekhti was widely read by women, either of the upper classes or of the courtesan society. As for female rekhti poets, I have come across mention of only three.(Naim 3)

If women's experiences are seen as homogeneous where they primarily lived in conventional households and rarely attended any poetic gatherings, then Naim's claim is justified. But *tawaifs* are not included in this discussion. *Tawaif*, plural of *taifa* means 'a troop of dancing girls'. The term is a general one, but is more generally applied to those who practised Islam[viii]. There were categories and rankings in among them. Training in singing and dancing was a mandatory feature of the courtesans who were considered to hold a higher position in the hierarchy of *tawaifs*. They cultivated the art of etiquette, decorum, witticisms and appropriate use of Urdu. (Mahmud 224,240)They attended and hosted several literary gatherings , they performed *ghazals* and often took part in discussions. Courtesans in Awadh flourished in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were considered to be repositories of culture, elegance and refinement, and were trained in good taste to cater to urban elite clients. Many of them could read and write Urdu and sometimes were talented poets in Urdu and Persian. To hone their skills, they became poetic disciples of some leading Urdu poets. Several courtesans were themselves poets. Ramjo, Janglo, Mah Liqa Ba'i 'Chanda' were Insha's contemporaries.(Vanita 6) The purpose of nineteenth century Lucknowi salons was to enable men to gather around a host to heighten their knowledge of poetry and music, hone their taste and indulge in cultural conversation. The hosts were generally sophisticated courtesans who played a dominant role in attracting well-read and refined clientele. The singing courtesans had their own reportaire of *ghazals*, *thumries*, *dadras* and other songs which they compiled in their personal notebooks with the help of their *ustads*. These collections acted as aide-memoire for public rendering. (Mahmud 253)

Rekhti tradition is notoriously claimed to be a voyeuristic product of male poets and met with both disapproval and amusement from its later critics and audience. The *ghazals* are portrayed in the voice of women, women involved in lesbian love affairs and expressing a plethora of emotions, ranging from pleasure to vexation. It incorporated real women's language of the time that reflected on the close poet-courtesan nexus of the time. *Rekhti* poets acknowledge women as makers of language. Abid Mirza, pen name 'Begam Lakhnavi' claims that women shaped the literary language of Lucknow:

> Language is determined by women (*Zuban ka faisala hai auraton par*)
>
> Where did wretched men get his speech?....
>
> Language skills are the right of women—(*Zubandani hai haqq begamon ka*)
>
> How can anyone fight tongue with tongue?(*Lara' e kya zuban ko'I zuban se*)
>
> (Vanita 91)

Frances W. Pritchett in the article "The Straw that I Took in My Teeth":Of Lovers, Beloveds and Charges of Sexism in the Urdu *Ghazal*' talks about the general sexism and the lack of consent in the lovers' attempt to pursue his (traditionally always an adult male) beloved in traditional mystical *ghazal*. (Francis W.Pritchett 32-34).What remains unnoticed in the discussion is how *rekhti*, albeit written by male poets who imitated feminine voices, offered a change in this tradition of Urdu *ghazal*. Much of *rekhti* is set in the home but it is a home that seethes with female emotions not primarily directed at husband and children. Wifehood and motherhood are relegated to the margins, while desire moves to the centre. Redefining women's emotional interiority pushes the acceptable norms towards figuring women as fully human and uncontainable in fixed categories. The speaker in *rekhti* fears her liaisons being exposed, but like the male lover in *rekhta,* she critiques social norms and declares her indifference to the slander. But with time the agency of Lucknow's courtesans diminishes. Jan sahib's verses mirror the history of courtesan's increasing displacement from Lucknow's political scenario and their roles are reduced to only sex work in the second half of nineteenth century. Post Sipoy Mutiny, the courtesans of Lucknow were registered as 'dancing and singing girls' in the civic tax ledgers. They were included in the highest tax bracket with the largest individual incomes of any in the city. The possessed massive property (houses, orchards, manufacturing and retail establishments for food and luxury items). Away from the intrusive colonial scrutiny of these women's bodies and properties was a culture of transgression, a culture that celebrated femininity which involved a covert of subversion of the existing culture as Veena Oldenberg notes,' ...their 'lifestyle' is resistance to rather than a perpetuation of patriarchal values'. (Oldenberg 261) colonial administrators and Indian social reformers attacked them as threats to heteronormative marriages and to women's rights(that is, married women's rights over their husbands). This motif of courtesan versus married women recurs throughout Jan Sahib's later works. He adopts the persona of older women who quarrel with other poets, figured as co-wives or prostitutes. The quest or celebration of pleasure is dampened, the speaker rarely expresses any desire in love or sex; even catalogues of fabrics or jewels are interspersed with complaints. Jan sahib lived into the post 1857 world when the ethos of pleasure and prosperity in Lucknow was replaced with poverty and displacement. He pines over the lost glory of love and often basks in self-wallowing pity. The ambience in which Jan Sahib portrays male-male relation is meant to convey what modern sensibilities would call 'decadence'. His is a conflicted persona who at times laments over lost beauty of an older woman and at other instances laughs at a man for bringing home a boy. (Vanita 257) He warns men against intimacy with too many people, probably men, in this case. He writes,

> You put your arm around everyone's waist
>
> Your ways will bring you a bad end, sir. (Vanita 258)

The earlier explorations of the context of the overtly sensual tenor of *ghazal* have sought to root it in an empiricist mode of life's experience. His late verses draw a rather gory profile of the inevitable tragic consequences of falling in love in medieval Indian society from which love had effectively been banished, and go on to explain the rise of the *ghazal* as an effusive manifestation of love's urges. Marriage in medieval Indian society was purely utilitarian, devoid of tenderness; love could thus constitute an experience outside of the boundaries of marriage alone; hence it was illicit.

Most critics writing in English have employed several strategies to privilege the heterosexual. Urdu *ghazal* is open to the possibility of evoking male-male or female-female desire because of its conventional use of the male gender for both lover and beloved. The gender ambivalence has been downplayed and female pronouns are used for the beloved in critical commentary. From the point of its conception, *rekhti* stood apart from traditional mystical *ghazal* and yet, the beloved's mystical potential has been forcefully formed while the earthly valence or the sexuality of the speakers are muted. For Example, while acknowledging in the text or footnotes that (a) Urdu verbs conventionally gender the beloved male, and more important, that (b) the beloved is often clearly a beautiful young male, Ralph Russell persists in making the beloved female in translation, and also in translating certain ungendered words like *khuban* (beautiful ones) as 'fair women' or even a 'lovely woman'. Russell excludes poems that are clearly about males, and in translation genders the ungendered originals.(Vanita *xv*) He acknowledges in a footnote that the beloved may be 'a parda woman, a courtesan or a boy'. Despite his insistence that the beloved is an abstract, ungendered idea, S.R Faruqi translates numerous ungendered beloveds into females. Frances Pritchett in the article "The Straw that I Took in my Teeth': Of Lovers,Beloveds, and Charges of Sexism in the Urdu *Ghazal*", notes that the beloved may be a boy or a woman and translates poetry with 'his/her', but in her analysis refers to the beloved only with female pronouns, while noting in parenthesis that it has been done for clarity and convenience since 'the verb is, as always in classical *ghazal*, masculine'. (Vanita xvi)

Ruth vanita denies that the poetic speech can bear any sort of resemblance to women's lives. She writes,

> I do not claim any one-to-one equivalence between rekhti and the material reality of women's lives. The depiction of characters in any text, particularly a literary text, cannot be taken as evidence of the way people actually live... Even though poetry is not a naturalistic representation of either or men but an imaginative re-creation of fictional figures who stand in an oblique relationship to reality, these

> poems provide fascinating insights into urban life because they ground their representation in actual cities, referring to specific locations (the river Gomti and the Machhi Bhawan fort in Lucknow);objects, such as food, dress, jewellery, music, transport and festivals; women and men belonging to named castes, classes, regions and occupations; and customs and rituals attested from other sources. Many critics writing in Urdu, who consider *rekhti* immoral, recognise it as historically important because it documents the stuff of women's everyday lives. (Vanita 5)

What is the incessant need of these critics to dilute the queer histories behind these literatures? Was there a tendency to deny that Islam could produce a feminism of its own that would validate female sexuality? Why was the history of close nexus between poets and courtesans overlooked? Why was the question of female sexuality as depicted in *rekhti* seen as a product of male voyeurism and devoid of its own history? Why was the notion of queerness deliberately silenced? Was this to produce an idea that Islam was gender unjust?

From the middle of the nineteenth century, scholars who have intellectualized the modalities of modernity in Indian cities, have posed certain fundamental questions. There were some practices and traditions present that are not quite modern or in the process of being so. Modernity is not a uniform process where it sets in or ends its process in a certain manner but it erupts and engulfs. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes,

> The experience of being a modern intellectual in an India in which undesirable practices from the past seem to help produce deformities in the modern gives that modernity a peculiar edge. the intellectual has an ambivalent relation to the past, whether this past is embodied in rural India or in one's older relatives. This can be seen in the problem of defining *tradition*. Should *tradition* include all the past? Or should it include only those bits of the past that meet with our approval today? Should the aim of education be to educate people out of the practices that are contrary to the principles of modernity, to move them away from activities or ideas that scientific rationality, democratic politics, and modern aesthetics find disturbing, if not downright repulsive? (Chakrabarty 39)

Modernity has been traditionally thought along the line of secularization where no religious practices are showcased in the public sphere for maintaining the newly acquired democracy in third world countries. Recognizing that there is considerable variation in actual patterns of secularization in different contexts, and that teleological assumptions of a singular, inexorable path of secularization are untenable, is secularization still a valid concept? Ruth Vanita paints the city of Awadh as this modern city on the verge of transformation. She describes how the women through these verses rise as shapers of an indigenous modernity. They slander the norms, they transgress, they fear the consequences, they laugh on the face of it or mourn the loss of her love but never does religion factor in this modernizing scenario. What we notice is a failure to pay attention to continuing and/or changing forms of cultural significance of religion in all societies. Eschewing postmodern declarations of the dawn of a post-secular modernity wherein the 'secularization as modernization' thesis is completely jettisoned, scholars in the field of sociology of religion have not completely abandoned the concept. Instead, they have, to one degree or another, sought to develop more nuanced and complex frameworks for researching and analysing secularization, which some label neo-secularization.(Reilly 10) The poets and courtesans and women depicted are believers, but there are always fissures between the norms and the lived experiences where one finds the history of subversion and the potential to reinterpret certain norms.

It is important to recognize that religion and experiences of secularization (or not) are encountered differently along gender lines as these intersect with other aspects of experience, especially class, race, ethnicity and geo-cultural location. Such differences need to be taken into account to understand and interpret changing gender patterns in literature of a bygone era. Scholars in this vein, therefore, call for multilevel analyses that map the relationship between social change and religious change in context specific studies. I would like to formulate a non-oppressive feminist response to current challenges around the interplay of religion, culture, secularism and the prospects to unveil the assaults of secular criticism on a literary text. Most Eurocentric feminist political theorizing, appears to take for granted, implicitly or explicitly, that the public and societal relevance of religion is (or will be) inevitably diminished as a consequence of 'modernization'. Within this logic, religion need not be centrally addressed in feminist theorizing, except in relation to women marked by 'religiousness as difference vis-a-vis contexts that have yet to 'modernize'. Increasingly, both the 'religious' versus 'secular' binary and the underlying assumptions of 'secular feminism' are being challenged. Sociological studies calls into question, the secularization thesis, the narrative of a single modernity wherein religion is expected to become a much diminished and private aspect of people's lives. The presumption of secularization as an inevitable or uniform process is no longer tenable. There is less agreement, however, on the nature, scale and implications of the persistence of religion as a social, cultural and political force globally. Recognizing that there is considerable variation in actual patterns of secularization in different contexts, and that teleological assumptions of a singular, inexorable path of secularization are untenable, is secularization still a valid concept? It is increasingly evident that it is necessary to construct and deploy more nuanced and complex frameworks for researching and analysing modernity, to distinguish between the political and social significance of religion and its cultural vitality.

Initially the main point of the insertion of religion in postmodern feminist thinking was to contest the problematic nature of exclusively male God language and the falsity of the dualistic thinking. By 'dualistic thinking', I here refer to the dyad of religious and secular and hence the need to develop postpatriarchal (re)interpretations of religious texts, traditions, practices and representations arose. It was important to start a dialogue to understand *rekhti* beyond its popular criticism. Popular criticisms show *rekhti* in a setting where modernity is setting in Awadh and how it copes (or cannot and is relegated to the margin) with these changes. Ruth Vanita in her extensive work on *rekhti* talks about the thematic differences in the available *ghazals* and how that reflects on the formation of urbanscapes. I would like to show that the understanding of modernity along the line of secularization causes an appropriation of the history of agency. Defining religion-focused scholarship as either religious/biased or secular/impartial, fails to understand core feminist epistemological insights including 'recognition that researcher and researched are caught up in a mutually subjective and transformative encounter that involves a high degree of personal commitment and trust.

Instead, the secular-religious binary reinforces a false idea of religion as a reified and bounded that scientifically and rationally knowable universe. The negative rendering of religion is in many respects an ironic holdover from feminism's own Enlightenment inheritance.(Reilly 11)

Recent work by Joan Wallach Scott and Judith Butler exemplify a new, explicit postmodern feminist engagement with religion, which extends feminist critiques of the ECR[ix]. Specifically, their analyses explicate the oppressive discursive practices that attend the gendered operationalization of 'secularity as modernity' culminating in, as Judith Butler describes it, 'cultural assaults' on religious minorities (Butler, 2008: 3)

This includes more flexibility in accommodating religion in the public spheres of multicultural democratic societies and in operationalizing a critically revised principle of secularism in democratic secular states .The project of interpretation or translation is not unproblematic, particularly when a ‘Third World’ culture or form of literature is judged by the Eurocentric tools of feminism. Cultural forms can no longer be seen to have a single determinate meaning and are understood in different ways by different cultural and subcultural groups. The complexity of viewing/reading practices in relation to representation does not imply that there is equality and freedom in the regime of representation. It is the very proliferation and deregulation of representations as part of a process towards the production of multiplicity of representations which undermines the restriction of the terms of political identity. Postfeminism has emerged as a result of critiques from, within and outside feminism. It has encouraged an intellectually dynamic forum for the articulation of contested theoretical debates emerging from within feminist theorising, as well as from feminisms’ intersection with a number of critical philosophical and political movements, including postmodernism and postcolonialism. What can be seen as the unsettling of the intellectual discipline of feminism by theoretical challenges from its margins or from subaltern discourses, has forced feminism to be more responsive to a range of political and ethical challenges.

The scientific, rational and objective intent of any research necessitates the shedding of religious authority. ‘Secular’ can suggest not only a condition of being unreligious but also religiously tolerant, humanist, modern and almost essentially western. This derived much of its meaning from a predominant stance that stood imaginatively in stark opposition to Islam which invariably leads to the question of whether the whole notion of ‘critique’ can be called secular at all. Shaming *rekhti* as ‘Misogynist’ is not only an act of blatant reductionism. It dismisses the history of autonomous sexuality, women’s agency and their right to pleasure. *Rekhti* does not need to be another western ‘rescue project’. Western feminisms belittle the fact that Muslims can generate a feminism of their own and in so doing denigrate Islam as inherently gender-unjust. A popular set piece in the orientalist discourse is centred on the feigned concern for the ‘Oppressed Muslim Women’s plight’, which thus justifies colonial and Neo-colonial incursions into Muslim societies. Religion from the very beginning has been in the backdrop of the feminisms that Islamic culture has constructed both explicitly and implicitly, whether they are called ‘Secular Feminism’ or ‘Islamic Feminism’. Western feminisms often overlook the role religion played in their feminisms. Islamic feminism was understood by its shapers as a new critical thinking for paving the way for gender liberation and social change in particular contexts. Its concern has not been a social reform but a fundamental reformation towards a post-foundationalist Islamic gender critique. Islamic feminism burst on the global scene as a new discourse or interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in *ijtihad* or independent intellectual investigation of the Qur’an and other religious texts. The juxtaposition of ‘secular feminism’ and ‘Islamic feminism’ illustrates how a common religious thread runs through both of them and the recent interrogations by Saba Mahmood, Talal Asad and Judith Butler in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, And Free Speech* show how this manipulates multiple valences of these terms. Both these positions are highly contested and necessary for purposes of identification and analysis. This dissertation will attempt to unveil the politics of interpretation, to explore how gender can be used as a category of cultural and historical analysis and reclamation of *rekhti* through an interaction with the tradition and applying a contextual approach in order to expand the methodologies of exegesis, rather than by undermining foundations and traditions. The progression of history is never unidirectional or monolithic. The world of critique has known invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises and ploys. Gender has a function similar to the Foucauldian notion of genealogy. It refuses to extend the linear finality of critique. There is something altogether different behind the project of Western secular feminism. I am interested in how post-colonial, non-western forms of feminism reread South-Asian literature or cultural practices with gender as the primary epistemological tool. This would mean engaging in dialogue with the tradition and applying contextual approaches in order to expand the methodologies of exegesis, rather than undermining foundations and traditions towards a ‘post-foundationalist Islamic gender critique’. Along with rethinking gender in Islamic thought, the contextual approach would contribute in fruitfully complicating political and ideological instrumentalizations of religious texts.

Postfeminist critiques of prevailing notions of gender studies reflect on the flawed basis of one global Feminism that needs to be taken down .We need to look for the emergence of localized regional feminisms that do not denigrate a particular culture or identity. It is important to articulate emancipatory feminist politics that is capable of addressing both contexts without reproducing western-centric hegemonies demands critical scrutiny of 'secularism' as a feminist principle in ways that respond to both liberal concerns about intolerance and communitarian critiques of the oppressive exclusion of religion from the public sphere. Debates around the political importance of ambivalence have been particularly important in theories of sexual and cultural representation around race and ethnicity and post-colonialism. The need is to complicate and expand the debates about gender in non-western societies beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy. It is important to note how popular cultural forms can be identified as a space for framing debates around identity, sexuality, ethnicity and the politics of interpretation. The cultural forms are both sites of opposition and sites of resistance for the emergence of new meanings. Gender can be used as the epistemological tool that cultivates representations and identities within newly defined cultural spaces. It has a polyvocal quality that can undermine the traditional cultural history associated with bodies, desire and identities. By documenting the discontinuities of history, it can dispel the shadow of a monolithic, transcendent culture from which marginalised groups and individuals must wrest the rights to their identities. The subject of feminism cannot be thought of as a stable, unified, or internally coherent entity without noticing the range of discourses within which subjects are constituted. The plurality of discursive domains within which women are located establishes diversity around issues of ‘subjectivity’, ‘identity’ and ‘difference’. The resistance to and subversion of dominant hegemonies can only emerge within the repetitive signifying practices and not from the claims to independent and discrete identities. The recent postfeminist critiques stress the importance of surfacing and making visible the complexities that already exist while redescribing those possibilities that already exist. But these possibilities exist within cultural domains that are designated as culturally unintelligible and invisible by dominant discourses.

There are always slippages between theory and practices, lived realities. No one ever lives their lives according to the norms. There has to be some sense of personal appropriation of Islamic mores. I am interested in these cracks—how women chose to live their lives even though there were castigations, how brutally they followed their desire and how confident they were in their skin, of their sexualities, how they read Qu’ran, who read it and in what context? Texts are always read from and within specific material and ideological sites and we need to be aware of these sites when attempting to understand readings of scripture. I think that it is wrong and misleading to speak about texts without also considering issues of context and inter and intratextuality. Especially where the Qur’an is concerned, a whole host of scholars have shown that it has been continually de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the light of Muslim sexual politics and this politics is overwhelmingly androcentric.

But first we might ask, what is a feminist interpretation of the Qur'an, and why refer to it as such? Feminist exegesis of the Qur'an is a strand of contemporary Qur'anic *tafsir*[x] , which, in contrast to premodern *tafsir* works, explicates the Qur'an not by proceeding systematically through the entirety of the text but rather selects verses according to their applicability to the themes of interest to the exegete, who interprets the selected verses in conjunction with one another to shed light on the Qur'an's broader treatment of the chosen themes. Feminist exegetical works share the aim of advocating the full personhood and moral agency of Muslim women within the parameters of the

Qur'an, which they all treat as the divine word of God, and to which they attribute the principle of the equality of all human beings, male and female. It is important to notice some of the verses in which the women speakers adopt the courtesans' language. They blur the line between morality and immorality, bask in the pain of their desire and weave these motifs in their daily conversations.

Tū̃ to okaṭī nahīn ja'egī mere 'aiboṅ meṅ
Arī maiṅ 'aib bharī hū̃ṅ to bhalạ tujh ko kyạ?" (Rangin's Manuscript, 935)

As Vanita translates,
"You won't be entangled in my vices
If I'm full of vices, what is it to you?(Vanita 12)

The defiant tone had appeared already in playful poems by senior poets, for example, Jur'at wrote a *Chaptinama*[xi] about two women, Sukkho and Mukkho, who enjoy a relationship with each other. It includes a line that declares that they are now well-known throughout the city as lovers, as indulgers of *Chapti*[xii], so there is no point hiding it.

Jab nạchne nikle to ghū̃ṅghaṭ kaisạ" (*Kulliyat-i Jur'at*, 261-262)
(When going out to dance, why wear a veil?) (Vanita 13)

Female-female relationships became virtually a hallmark of Lucknow *rekhti*. There are explicit details of homosexual lovemaking.

Dam lo, ạrạm karo, rạg wạg gạo, gạl milo, gạl milwạo, maḥram kholo, maḥram khulwạo, misạs karo, misạs karwạo, gol gol kū̃lha milo milwạo, ạh wạh karo, karwạo …Al ḥặṣil sar maḥram khulặ aur har ṭaraḥ ka misặs aur khil khilặo aur mil milặo ho kặr rặg kặ lahwa lagặ"(Insha ki Do Kahaniya, 107)

> Relax, rest a while, sing, embrace and be embraced, open your bodice, get me to open mine, touch and be touched, join round hips, gasp and make me gasp…The bodices opened and every type of pressing, playing and union took place, in the diversion of passion.(Vanita 15)

Jur'at wrote a narrative poem which is basucally a *chaptinama* about two women Sukkho and Mukhho. Women who have sex with women are referred as *Chapat-baz*. Sukkho and Mukkho invite other women over to discuss with them the pleasures and art of chapti. Ruth Vanita explores *rekhti* as something that reconstructed the urbanscape from a woman's perspective. Rooftops emerge as a crucial motif in rekhti that possessed both the quality of exteriority and interiority. It emerged as a parallel cityscape that was constituted of places women frequently went, like gardens, balconies, kitchen, bedrooms, marketplace of fabric, spice, *ittar* or jewellery etc. It carried the element of risque. In rekhti, female lovers often belonged to the same household and feared that the sound of their lovemaking would create a ruckus. Insha's poems are marked by the dangers and yearning of pre-modern queer poetry.

Tere koṭhe pe rặt mar kamaṇḍ
Chhup rahe the hum ek muṇḍer kī ặr
Ṭṻṭ jặve kahīṅ yah terī chṻl
Are o besure nigoṛe kiwặṛ...
kyặ karṻṅ jặntī hṻṅ chặhat meṅ
Lặkh ṭarḥoṅ kī hai ukhặṛ pachhaặṛ
Jab talak ho sake du-gặna jan
Kījiye apnī ṭaraf se dauṛ dapặṛ
Ḁge phir yặ naṣīb yặ qismat

Jo badặ ho sanwặr ya ki bigặṛ…

As Vanita Translates,

At night I scaled your rooftop with a ladder
And hid behind the parapet
I wish your hinge would break
You wretched, unmelodious door...
It can't be helped--I know that in love
One has to face many types of slander
As long as you can, o du-gana, my life!
Keep trying your best--
Ultimately, fate or destiny will decide
Whether or are ruined.(Vanita 52, 53)

Rekhti maps desire on to common items of dress and simultaneously complicates everyday conversations and activities by suggesting the hidden erotocity of those overlooked mundane activities. The verses excel in double entendre based in domesticity. The recurrent theme fighting becomes a metaphor for passionate lovemaking between lovers and household objects too have erotic connotations. Qais and Nisbat’s speakers complain about their women lovers.The longing for attention sometimes is woven with uneventful details of daily lives. The speaker puts almond in the preparation of meat that day, because her *du-gana*[xiii] might come.

Today *du-gana* is coming as a guest to my house
Quickly cook meat with almonds, maid. (Qais,KtR,125:56,ari laundi; translation Vanita 62)

The availability of various goods in a cosmopolitan city allowed individuals to pick and choose their outfits. *Rekhti* incorporates the pangs and perks of a lover, the female speaker complains about her *du-gana*[xiv], about her bodice being too heavy or sometimes how her outfit has caused her discomfort during the act of *chapti*[xv].

Chubtī hai yah to nigoṛī mujhe bhari angiya
Ko'ī sặdī sī mara wặste lặ rī angiyặ
Gokharū̃ lahar bannat ḍak sitặre kyặ chīz
Is se ho jặtī hai kambaḳḥt gaṅwặrī angiyặ
gend ek maiṅ ne jo pheṅkī to jhijhak kar un ne
Kuchh ajob ḍol se kal apnī sanwặrī angiyặ
Bībī mughalặnī jo sī lặ'ī thī ặ'ī na pasand
Begama j'ī ne woh sar un ke mặrī angiyặ
jis meṅ bū̃ bặs ho terī woh nishặnī de ḍặl
Challặ maiṅ kyặ karū̃ngī a'e terī vặrī angiyặ
Oṛhni mujh se jo badlī to ajī bajī jặn
Woh hī ek de jo ho bhặrī se bhặrī angiyặ
Thī ajab ko'ī sughaṛ jis ne yah kặṛhe buṭe
wặchhṛe ban ga'ī ek phū̃lon kī kyặrī angiyặ
asharfī tum ne jo dhar lī to ajī yah ṭhaharī

Nặz aur ặn kī goyặ ki piṭarī angiyặ

Hặth Inshặ kặ kahīṅ chhũ̄ jo gayặ to bolīṅ

Terặ maqdũ̄r ki tũ̄ chheṛe hamặrī angiyặ

Vanita translates,

It pricks me, this wretched heavy bodice--

Go get me a simple bodice, please

tinsel, sequins,glitter,spangles--all these

make a wretched bodice look rustic

Yesterday, I threw a ball, she hesitated and then

Adjusted her bodice with a strange swing

Madam seamstress stiched and brought the bodice

The young lady didn't like it; she threw it at her head

Give me as a token something that smells of you--

what'll i do with a ring? i'm devoted to your bodice

Now that you've exchanged scarves with me, baji dear,

give me, please, a heavily embroidered bodice

She was amazingly skilled, whoever embroidered these sprigs

wonderful-- the bodice became a bed of flowers

May no one wear a bodice with cups transparent as dew

The stars sank, even as she adjusted her bodice

You put the gold coin away inside, and it became

A box of airs and graces-- the bodice

Insha's hand brushed her, and she said,

What cheek, you dare meddle with my bodice? (Vanita 71, 72)

The sexual fare with a courtesan, especially in Awadh, included genital sex, anal sex and oral sex. They learnt the enticement techniques and wiles from an older courtesan. Their uninhibited and unrepressed sexuality offered a lesson to the elite male clients. They were culturally accepted as counsellors and mentors for the sexual education of the elite. The education in sensuality, poetry, pleasure and the graces of courtly conversation marked an important stage in the upbringing of aristocratic men. However, the tacit or expressed permission to young men to visit *kothas* was not meant to be a licence for licentiousness. Young men from *sharif* Hindu and Muslim families were supposed to behave in a disciplined manner and not become dissipated. (Mahmud 246) Sex and market come together blatantly in some of Nisbat's verses where the speaker reveals her wish to buy a dildo. She declares that Calcutta ones are superior to local ones and is willing to pay extra if they are made of whale bone or leather. The particular poem ends with the dildo disappearing from her trunk, and her crying out that the mischievous creature has run away.(Vanita 75) The language of *Rekhti* that has been interpreted to be a pornographic medium for aristocratic men in Awadh, was the language of the courtesans. This was the language of dissidence that ruptured the markers of obscenity and respectability. Regardless of a poet's popularity in his own time, the combination of colloquial language with description of explicitly sexual (especially homosexual) act almost always resulted in marginalization. The language bore the markers of women's sexual agency of nineteenth century. How a certain section of the society that was deemed to have taught the importance of women's pleasure and foreplay has been completely subsided, reveals a lot about the politics of secular criticism and translation.

Rekhti arose at a moment when Lucknow had developed a court culture saturated with the presence of women. Lucknow with its gender bending glamour, emergence of new classical singing, *khayal* fostered an atmosphere where Awadhi rulers embraced women's mannerisms. Nawab Nasir-ud-Din crossdressed, enacted labour which was attended by many women. This tradition of transgression, queering the public space and hedonism is the break between the norms and lived realities. The critical condemnation of *rekhti* has less to do with men creating women speakers and more to do with its depiction of female-female sexual acts and how Islam interprets it. Unlike male-male love in the mystical *ghazal*, female-female love cannot be explained as having mystical meaning and the raw sensuality of these verses become a source for greater anxiety.

The polyvocal quality of this entire debate on how to interpret this culture entangles the controversies between the practises and the positionalities of those who seek to resist the given labels: who is entitled to speak as and/or name someone else as an 'Islamic feminist?' How are these labels accommodated, contested and eventually resisted? With these questions in mind, providing an exclusive definition of the term 'Islamic feminism' would raise numerous concerns, given the multiplicity of definitions concerning different ways of conceptualizing feminism and the debates concerning 'Islamic' or 'Islamist' in connection with feminisms. Scholars challenging patriarchal readings of the Qu'ran and the Hadith have demonstrated how it is not the texts themselves but rather their interpretations that have allowed for patriarchal traditions to persist, leading to feminist discourse and practice grounded in an Islamic paradigm. Islamic history repeatedly features elite religious authorities' attempts to eliminate what they perceive as unacceptable, nonnegotiable aberrations to their views of Islam. Such authorities draw lines around an inviolable centre of Islamic tradition, attempting to seal it off from deviations in thought and practice outside of its imagined edge as a way to secure compliance with their religious authority. However, Muslim thought and practice on the edge have persisted steadily throughout the course of Islamic history; various groups of Muslims have always practiced Islam in ways that do not conform to the regulations of the center. Feminist Qur'anic interpretation resides precisely at such an edge, a place of animated change and the avowal and disavowal of tradition. A place troubled with the conflict between faith and day to day life, a space of spiritual quandary. The poets and the courtesans were practicing Muslims. Faith in a religion is not homogeneous and what constitutes as ‘Islamic’ to a particular person varies from person to person. It is difficult to pin down how they transgressed and where they transgressed. Qur’an particularly forbids promiscuity for women and yet believers have been involved in polyamorous relationships. Some of them believed in the Islamic doctrines of peace or egalitarianism but somehow failed direct or control their sexualities according to the norms. This is where Islamic feminism comes as a methodology to critique these texts where an in-between space is created within criticism that considers religion to be a part of speaker’s lived realities.

Unveiling the Slippages between Norms and Lived Realities: Muslim Writings from the Twentieth Century

Against the backdrop of the colonial history in which Europeans framed their conquests of Muslim lands as civilizing missions that would save Muslim women from Muslim men, Muslim defensiveness against Eurocentric onslaughts on their cultures has resulted in the casting of Muslim women in the perpetual role of cultural gatekeepers rendering them the repositories of Muslim values. Any debate on gender has been transformed into the question of cultural authenticity whereby many Muslims have come to associate any sort of colonial incursion with imperialist violence. In the confines of this kind of discourse, Muslim women's efforts at developing a feminist exegesis of the Qur'an are often seen as an internalization of western thinking, and hence betraying the foundation of Muslim religio-cultural heritage.

This chapter is comprised of women of literary scandal. It looks at the writings of Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai and through them attempts to establish (if at all) the scopes of Islamic Feminism in twentieth century India. Until the middle of the twentieth century, there was not much writing that explicitly talked about Muslim women's sexuality. The writings that championed Muslim women’s rights were mostly concerned with Muslim women’s education, and questions of equality in different sectors, and struggled to pierce the shrouded mystery that is the zenana. Zenana[xvi] refers to the protected and secluded quarters in a Muslim household that has no engagement with the outside world. It is traditionally seen as an arrangement that was created primarily to confine women. Female sexuality has always been a matter of concern as a threat to unleash chaos upon the public sphere and hence it is deliberately kept at far remove from the androcentric public sphere. The zenana remains an embodiment of a glorious past that has hinged on conservative ideologies. It became the focal point of reformist religious and legal discourse. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Maulana Ashraf Ali penned *Bihisti Zewar* that instructs Muslim women on everything that might be a concern for public sphere, from letter writing to detailed instruction on how to behave in front of one's in-laws, *Bihisti Zewar* was aimed at producing good Muslim women. There is no doubt that Maulana Ashraf Ali was patriarchal. His book is termed regressive now but a rulebook to propagate education among Muslim women at the beginning of twentieth century was a triumphant step indeed. This book was the first attempt that demanded Urdu education for women so that they could read the original religious texts themselves and could attend religious gatherings. But it also offered an outlook of how the zenana should be. As a contrasting image, this chapter strives to see how the Progressive Writers' Association sexualised or rather unveiled an already sexualised space that is the Zenana. It has always been a gender-fluid space where women shed their inhibitions and explore their bodies and sexual desires. But the trademark image has always been of a space that contains female sexuality and subjugates them. Before I embark on their handling of female sexuality, it is important to notice the time period in which they are writing. Besides being a doctor and a dedicated member of Communist party of India (CPI), Rashid Jahan was one of the celebrated and founding members of Progressive Writers' Association (PWA)[xvii]. If we mainly see her as a celebrated icon of Progressive Writers' Movement, a movement that shook the country's literary and political scene in twentieth century, we understand the values and ideology that drove her relentless work (mainly) on women's issues. She asked uncomfortable questions on the perils of Indian women's cloistered lives, women's reproductive health and the need for birth control and the general need for education to ward off social evils like early marriage and frequent pregnancy. No amount of writing on subversion that happened at every crack of heteronormative society can clarify my point if the social scenario of mainstream society is not reflected properly. It is worth pondering how the question of female sexuality and the modalities of it have changed over time. Yes, the ideology of Islamic Feminism was yet to arrive and even the concept of feminism was at a nascent stage in India. I have looked at the possibilities of reclaiming the nineteenth century ghazal, *rekhti* through the methodologies of Islamic feminism in the first chapter. As I proceed genealogically, I attempt to reflect on the same question of sexuality and the changes that came in the twentieth century. The twentieth century was a period of hostile transition. As the first manifesto of Progressive Writers' Association[xviii] reads,

> Radical changes are taking place in Indian society. The spirit of reaction, however, though moribund and doomed to ultimate decay, is still operative and is making desperate efforts to prolong it. Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical literature, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality. The result is that it has become anaemic in body and mind and has adopted a rigid formalism and a banal and perverse ideology.(Progressive Writers' Conference by SAPF UK, No Pagination)

Indepence and partition are the principal backdrops against which much of Chughtai and Jahan's writings unfold. They both write passionately on the status of women, their roles in the society and their indeterminate future. These writings reveal the unwavering belief in the potential power of literature to reform. *Lihaf* signalled a moment of arrival of Muslim women writers who wrote about what they were not supposed to, talked about female bodies and sexualities, laughed at ludicrous court trials[xix] and made forays into the controversial literary public sphere. Chughtai touches directly upon the taboos that writers must contend with, and the hypocrisy that lies at the heart of the debate about what is filthy and what is not. In her essay "A Word", Chughtai touches upon the hypocrisy and taboos regarding sexuality. She writes,

> Whatever else contemporary literature might be, it is without doubt, the cry of young people, a cry that is like the hissing of a wounded snake; it cannot be

> suppressed, your objections and taunts cannot force it to cower fearfully. The young writer will scream, if he is hurt he will groan. This sexual hunger, which enlightened individuals find offensive, will continue to be seen in stories. If it is a hunger then why should it not be accompanied by protest? Is the sexual hunger that one sees in humans not related at all to economic and cultural factors? Do you not see the insidious touch of politics in it? You must have read about supply and demand in economics. Apply this theory to our present-day lives. There's a demand for sex, and supply too, but there is no market. In other words, there are men and there are women, and there are sexual urges, but it is shameful to mention all three in the same breath.(Chughtai 2001: 20, 21)

In the light these observations, it is clear why these authors came up together to destroy the construct of 'obscenity' with little thought or regard for the uproar it might generate. Rashid Jahan's *Behind the veil* is an extended dialogue between two women from a *sharif* Muslim household. As a doctor, she has seen intimately the ill effects of frequent pregnancies and lack of reproductive healthcare on married women. Jahan presents a harrowing picture of these women who are little more than sexual slaves of their husbands. In the play, married at eighteen, Muhammadi Begum has borne a child every year, except twice, once when her husband was abroad and the second time when they had fought. To keep her husband from straying, Muhammad Begum even got her vagina fixed up so that her lower parts do not sag. The popular review rested on the play's depiction of men's complete disregard for women's healthcare or feelings. The play portrays Muhammadi Begum as a victim of domesticity, marriage and sexuality. But interestingly, the other character, Aftab Begum recalls her sexual agency in a particular instance. Aftab Begum remembers a period when a woman had her right to say 'no' to a sexual act. She says,

> Ai hai, so that's it! How could have I known? God save us from such men; they are worse than animals. We didn't have such things in our time; now every man one hears of has the same problem. Take the case of your brother-

> in-law…of course he is old now but in his youth, he never forced himself on me.(smiles) By God, how I used to make him beg for hours! (Jahan 203)

What we see is a change of sexual behaviour in Muslim households of the 1930s when one of the characters cannot help but reminisce how the simple act of saying 'no' had once made her feel powerful. Consent was important in a sexual relationship. The slow rise of Islamic fundamentalism all over the world had started to accommodate more an androcentric interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith in day-to-day Muslim lives. What is seen to be Islam's inherent unjust treatment of women as mere sexual objects devoid of any choice or agency is more of a recent phenomenon. The relative variance in a religious or political tradition, stretching from Indonesia and Malaysia to Morocco, suggests that Islamic traditions and values are subject to mould according to the political scenario and local customs. Hence, Islam cannot be taken as the sole signifier of the situation of women in Islamic societies. Yes, *Zina*, sex between a man and woman who is neither his wife nor his slave, was recorded as the most serious transgression in the Qur'an. But consent has traditionally been seen as the operative word in a sexual relationship. It defines whether the sexual relationship is immoral or not. (Ali 57)

> Marital intercourse is the paradigmatic sexual act in Islamic law. Its lawful nature does not exempt it from legal scrutiny; if anything, the opposite is the case. Sex within marriage has a variety of financial, social, and ritual consequences that require jurisprudential regulation. The Qur'an and the *Hadith*, both lay stress on the importance of a woman's sexual satisfaction**.** Interestingly, there is also a frank discussion on foreplay in the Qur'an. Prophet Muhammad implicitly advocated foreplay between couples and commented that: "None of you should fall on top of his wife like way animals fall on each other… If the man finishes first he should wait for his wife until she has also finished.*"* To a great extent, this can be interpreted to mean that women should not be ashamed of their sexuality and sexual desires as Islam perceives sex between couples as something

> that should be mutually satisfying to both the partners. Unfortunately, premarital sex and sex outside of a marital bond are considered sinful and prohibited, thus limiting a Muslim woman’s choices over her body and sexuality outside the realm of the institution of marriage. In the same context, alternate sexuality is also frowned upon. The positive aspect with regard to sexual and reproductive health is that Muslim women do have choices with regard to their bodies.
>
> Nowhere does Islam specifically mention or ban abortion. Different verses within the Qur’an have been interpreted to support the claim that abortion is impermissible. One of such verses which states, “And do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We give them sustenance and yourselves (too): surely to kill them is a great wrong” (17:31), is actually believed to refer to female infanticide that was rampant in pre-Islamic Arab. The *Hanafi* school of Islam permits abortion without the husband’s permission provided there are reasonable grounds for the same. (Nishat Amber no pagination)

But as traditional religious authorities have drawn a boundary around the impenetrable centre of Islamic thought and practice, certain groups or sects have always practised Islam in a way that would never be normative. Chughtai's characters Begum Jaan or Shaman reside in this space of constant encounter and confrontation. But can we call them Islamic feminists? Before that, it is important to lay down what I mean by 'feminist interpretation of the Qur'an'. As Ayesha Hidyatullah mentions,

> Feminist exegesis of the Qur'an is a strand of Qur'anic tafsir, that, in contrast to premodern tafsir works, explicates the Qur'an not by proceeding systematically through the entirety of the text but rather selects verses according to their applicability to the themes of interest to the exegete, who interprets the selected verses in conjunction with one another to shed light on the Qur'an's broader treatment of the chosen themes. (Hidyatullah 4)

Feminism has strong associations with political modernity, which is synonymous with a construct associated with European modernity, and the genealogy of feminism is intimately associated with the intellectual and theological traditions of Europe. Islamic feminism is implicated in a project that seeks to produce sameness or equivalence between feminism and its Muslim other, even as the project is premised upon recognizing the otherness of Muslim women's experiences. How does one envision or document ways of being modern that speak to that which is shared across the world as well as stays faithful to human cultural diversity? One of the main concerns with Islamic feminism is the difficulty of implementing this theoretical babel in one's politics. This particular concern is related to another question-- has Islamic feminism reached a theoretical dead end?

In answer, I would like to suggest that since feminism is woven into a person's politics and choices, there are no definitive parameters which decide the ingredients needed to form Islamic Feminism in perfect practicality. The space in which Islamic Feminists reside, in this case Begum Jaan or Shaman might be at a ill-formed, jaded space that does not have the sharpness of theories but is based on their subjective political choices.

Begum Jaan uses her sexuality as an instrument for her empowerment. Although outwardly she abides by the patriarchal norms and possesses all the traits necessary for a virtuous woman in a patriarchal set-up, it is within the zenana that she refuses to give up her needs and desires for sexual satisfaction even if the only way left to her is to fulfil them by resorting to a deviant sexual relationship. The impetus and the motivation for her homoerotic relationship with Rabbu is the male-male relationship between the *Nawab* and the young students. Neglected by an aristocratic husband who prefers to spend his time with beautiful young men, a young bride is 'installed . . . in the house with the rest of his furniture' and 'tethered to her canopied bed' (Chughtai 1993: 130). Eventually, the cocooned wife finds physical and emotional fulfilment in the bed she ends up sharing with her maid. The story exposes several entangled threads of desire. Simultaneously, it brings out the alternative dimensions of desire between two who got together out of circumstance and definitely out of volition. The Zenana, then, becomes the space where radical desires for sexual liberation are articulated. It becomes a space for the expression of subversive desires under the garb of normalcy. Here I will digress for a bit and problematize the phrase ‘out of volition’. Another same sort of debate that dominated critical feminist reading, was the plotline of Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*[xx].The plot of the film revolves around two women, housewives in a traditional Hindu family, Radha and Nita (played by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das) who, having been deserted by their husbands enter into a lesbian relationship with each other. Set within a middle-class Hindu family in Delhi, the film portrays both women as oppressed in their respective marriages. They turn to each other and develop an emotional, sensuous and sexual relationship. Now, both Chughtai’s *Lihaf* and Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996) portray lesbian relationships as resulting from problems women confront within their marriage. It is a point of contention for the cases—whether it was volition or expediency for the women. Both these works records a discovery of sexual desire as something of a surprise, and yet there is a sense that it may not have happened if there had been fulfilment in the heterosexual marriage. It might also have happened as adulterous development and the ensuing debates do not offer monolithic interpretation.

The quilt becomes an important symbol for the concealment of the subversive activities and essentially becomes a metaphor for a queer space. This dissertation would like to explore and interrogate the continuum of queer spaces through female sexuality. If in the first chapter, it was the rooftop or verandah where women gathered, gossiped or squealed with laughter while talking about their lascivious activities, in *Lihaf* that space has shrunk. It has transformed into a mysterious hole under a shaking quilt where Begum Jaan and Rabbu engage in lesbian sex. The dynamics of sexuality within enclosed spaces-- the quilt, the veil, and the zenana-- all of it are unveiled through the child's fearful visual description and display of Begun Jaan's body. *Lihaf* is a covering both for hiding the narrator beneath it and for concealing the activities of Begum Jaan and Rabbu at night. Chughtai does not explicitly state what goes on between the two women beneath the quilt. Chughtai’s deliberate strategies of nonnaming and hazy description play a multifaceted role; it teases the reader about its factuality. Hers is a narrative ploy to escape the threat of censorship and simultaneously it kind of depicts the bewilderment of a child who does not understand the acts that unfolded before her eyes under the quilt. The shadow cast on the wall in the form of an elephant is used as a metaphor for the physical relationship between the two women: “In the dark Begum Jaan’s quilt was once again swaying like an elephant. “Allah! Ah!...” I moaned in a feeble voice. The elephant inside the quilt heaved up and then sat down. I was mute. The elephant started to sway again” (Chughtai 40). Chughtai refuses to say anything about the relationship between the two women till the very end. Towards the end of the story, when the girl resolves to peep beneath the quilt to check what goes on there every night, she exclaims, “Good God!” (Chughtai 40) and plunges into her bed beneath her quilt.

> The story challenges historical and culturally contingent discussions of sexual alignments that have been mediated through the normalizations practiced in sexual identity politics movements in two ways. The first problematic it implicitly challenges is the conflation of authors' sexualities with their work, and vice versa, and the concomitant slip from biography into critical reading frames. “Lihaf's" "author" as a married woman, who has provided no biographical narratives of gynocentric desire, at the very least calls into question this slippage. The second challenge the story offers to the theorization of sexuality is that gynocentric desire is located within a very "traditional" Muslim heterosexed household. By "traditional" I mean a nonnuclear, extended family, sexually segregated household, which evolved as a result of a quotidian arranged marriage between two ostensibly "straight" parties.(Patel 2001: 6)

Nowhere in the story does Chughtai reveal characters' sexuality, which also becomes one of the reasons *Lihaf* won its case at Lahore high court. She makes no explicit reference to either sexual activity or to lesbian relationships. We do not know if we can call them lesbians but it is an alternative narrative of same sex desire. As Priyamvada Gopal writes,

> *Lihaf* is neither a call to feminist arms nor a celebration of lesbian relationships; indeed, the story lends itself quite easily to a homophobic reading especially in the context of remarks Chughtai was to make later about such relationships as ‘vices’. She simply noted at the time, somewhat disingenuously, that her mind was ‘an ordinary camera that records reality as it is’; if such relationships between women existed, then she had to write about them (Chughtai 2001: 249). The significance of the story lies in its attention to the intricately layered sexual politics of the domestic sphere and the complicated emotional lives of its denizens.(Gopal 66)

Despite its negotiation with a different political era and Chughtai’s tongue in cheek commentary on lesbian sexuality, the importance of *Lihaf* lies in its potential to signal a moment of arrival for the generation of Muslim women who claimed the right to talk about female sexuality. Enclosed within her zenana, Begum Jaan turned toward someone who could legitimately enter and occupy the same space, another woman. It is also interesting to note how the magnetism of Begum Jaan's body enticed the narrator/child as well. The sheen of her calves, the tint of her lips and her long tousled hair pulled the child into the zenana. The homoerotic relationship between Begum and Rabbu is vividly drawn through the symbol of the quilt which, to the wonder and horror of the child-narrator, undulates at night as though there is an elephant rising inside. The greatest strength of the story lies in its subtle combination of the facetious and the serious—the ability to imbue a scene of illegitimate sex with laughter and spirit. The dexterous use of the quilt and its shadows create an ambiguity which emanates from the contrast between the speciously calm external aspect of things and the treacherous undercurrent. Geeta Patel writes,

> ... the child's sexualized viewing seems almost quotidian. It remains one thread in the story of this house. As the story progresses, however, the child is pulled

> closer and closer in, and at last touches Begum Jan. At this point, when the child's desire turns physical, it becomes terrifying to her. She is then caught uncomprehending in the incomprehensible fear that wells up in her when her desire is embodied. (Patel 2001:9)

The child narrator’s voice seems to mouth the words of normativity. The incomprehensible fear of ‘aberrant sexuality’ that she notices under the quilt matures into the character of Shaman in her cluelessness to grasp her sexuality in Chughtai’s later work, *The Crooked Line*. It is a testament to the difficult road an adult female journey must traverse towards heteronormativity, a journey of learning about how to get accustomed to heterosexuality even if it does not come naturally to her. The novel is certainly a tour de force in its incisive exploration of female sexuality, its compelling account of sensibility under stress and its treatment of a precarious subject with utmost delicacy. Written from the point of view of a middle-class female subject, *The Crooked Line* provides an extended account of a lived experience of modernity in the context of nation formation. Shaman, or Shamshad Fatima learns it the hard way. Since her birth we see her as this ungendered figure who resists being pinned down to one sexuality. Chughtai depicts child's psycho-sexual growth with intricate detailing. Shaman encounters and tries to overcome a host of socio-sexual conflicts which draw upon the circumstances, but at the same time transcend and mythify, the author's own autobiography. Making her entry into the world as the unwelcome tenth child of her parents, Shaman, the protagonist, has to engage herself in a series of encounters with the members of her extended family who regarded her as a positive threat to their accepted norms of decency and morality. Though written largely in the omniscient mode, the novel mixes memories and desires in such a way that some of Shaman's experiences in her childhood acquire epiphanic dimensions and throughout the novel they serve as reference points constantly reminding us that appearances are deceptive, social morals are a matter of convenience rather than honesty and that sexual urge is the most primal and pressing urge of human beings driving them to all kinds of subterfuges. Shaman's entanglements with the flesh begin with her jealous colonisation, as a baby, of her wet-nurse Unna's affections. This, of course, is fairly typical of the genre of the Bildungsroman[xxi], but what is atypical are Shaman's disturbingly sexual emotions for her wet-nurse Unna, and her sister, Manjhu, who becomes a surrogate mother figure after Unna is exiled for frolicking in the barn with a young male servant. *The Crooked Line* is dramatically forthright in how it represents the young child's erotic and sexual desires - the child's longings are not sanitised of the pleasures of the flesh, nor is the mother-child relationship represented as an other-wordly, purely maternal relationship that is free of the unsettling disturbances produced by the sexual gaze and the responses of the body itself. Shaman's disturbing gaze successfully destabilises conventional notions of idyllic, peaceful, sexless, de-eroticised childhoods. Shaman's desire as an infant for her wet-nurse Unna is not presented as infantile; Chughtai's description of the erotic bond between nurse and references to 'suckling breasts' is such that it is hard to not see it as sexual, though the desire flows out of a being as yet not gendered insofar as gender means training in the conventions of how each sex should behave.

Shaman replaces the unavailability of a mother figure with changing female figures. She longs for their touch, gazes at them when they are caught unawares and pines for them painfully if they are out of sight. Gradually the arena shifts to the school at Aligarh where Shaman goes to study and later on to the school where she takes up a job, but the essential nature of the encounters remains the same. Be it her wet nurse, Unna or her older sister, Manjhu or her favourite teacher at school, Shaman is drawn to female bodies like a magnetic force. Her gaze is not childlike. It is a piercing gaze of a person who is unfazed by how a girl should behave but is caught in the conundrum of sexuality. After her favourite teacher, Miss Charan left the school because of Shaman's unexplained obsessive behaviour around her, Shaman found herself stuck in a quagmire. She did not cope well with the unwelcome changes in her adolescent body or the first stirrings of sexuality. The different kinds of relationships that develops between her and Rasul Fatima, her and Najma, and Sa'dat and Najma demonstrate how, deprived of the possibility of natural early sexual explorations with boys in particular that are decreed or encouraged by a heteronormative setup in the hypocritical and cloistered environment of home and school, these girls turned to each other for the satisfaction of their as yet imperfectly perceived and inarticulate, but nevertheless strong, sexual desires. When Rasul Fatima expressed her adoration for Shaman, it was downright repulsive to her. By then, she began to understand how a woman should not act around another woman in a normative setup. Shaman's character is debatably autobiographic in nature. Like Chughtai, Shaman is a rebel, a misfit in the heteronormative society who would rather be jumping around in dirt than dressing up or behaving as she is told. Chughtai's disavowal of lesbianism in the story might be her resistance to being tagged as the writer of purely of homoerotic themes[xxii]. Chughtai writes in *A Life in Words: Memoirs*,

> I am still labelled as the writer of *Lihaf*. The story had brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It had become the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight. When I wrote *Terhi Lakeer* and sent it to ... [editors, ... they] advised me to make my heroine a lesbian like the protagonist in *Lihaf*. I was furious. I got the novel back even though the calligrapher had started working on it .... *Lihaf* had made my life miserable.(40)

Having said that, it can also be her intention to present a protagonist who is polymorphously ‘perverted’ in traditional eyes. Probably Chughtai meant it to be unclarified, tangled in mystery like desire is in general. Shaman’s desire is unexplained like her childhood obsession with eating mud. The world around shaman is driven by a bestial force. Desire in *'The Crooked Line'* is untinted. It has been portrayed in a manner that is unpolished, uncomfortable and instigates disarray. It points to heterogeneous ways of forging a politics of challenge to normative orders of desiring. It has the potential to help interrogate the dominant straitlaced homonormative politics that popularly plays on the binary of either seeing homosexuality as a process of ‘coming out’ and remaining intelligible within the public realm or completely subsided in margins. Judith Butler argues that the term ‘queer’ must never claim fully describe those it claims to represent if it is to retain any of its radical valences at all (Butler 230).

A successful queer description should have more than one trajectory. If anything, *The Crooked Line* uses difference of various kinds, sexual difference being one, to fracture notions of unified consciousness and personality. Shaman's homoerotic desire is a part of a spectrum of sexualities, and therefore is in a dialogue with heterosexuality and heteronormativity rather than in an oppositional, bifurcated relationship.

The playful shadowy queer space under the quilt in *Lihaf* has transformed into the dark rooms and corridors of an all-girls' hostel in *The crooked Line*. Dormitories were established as a response to the growth of urban and industrial jobs as well as the growth of schooling for girls and women in provincial and urban places. As a sex-segregated space, the dormitory provides a homosocial environment that allows women to conform to hegemonic gender norms; these norms require them to be heterosexually chaste and circumscribe their movements in settings that are coded as 'public'. Yet the dormitory is also a location in which female homoeroticism is produced through the intersections of social, economic, and political interactions. The dormitory is, a generic space—a space that is not specifically read as queer nor understood in its cultural context as a site of contestation or resistance to normative orders. If emerging sexual cultures are understood as products of economic, political and cultural global forces, then the question of which spaces are produced through these global relationships becomes particularly relevant. The idea that there is such a thing as 'private' space that is closed off from global/ social/economic forces, and participation in spaces coded as 'public', identified through a register of visibility , is a recurrent setting in Chughtai's works.

In the first chapter, I have attempted to show the close nexus between Awadhi courtesans and *Rekhti* poets, where their transgressive ways, sexual agency were strategically brushed aside by politics of translation. But an ideology based on posy-foundationalist Islamic critique of gender has helped reclaiming their potential to interpret the question of sexuality among women who practice Islam. By 'ideology', I mean religion as a subnational, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for. This chapter records the shift. In the middle of coping with accelerated social change brought about by the growth of nationalism and the ongoing world war, twentieth century saw a generation of writers emerge who reflexively engaged with modernity. Both Chughtai and Jahan depicted middle class, upper middle class Muslim household caught in the period of transition. Can we call these characters ‘Islamic Feminists’? The characters I have discussed here, Begum Jaan, Shaman or Aftab Begum are believing women, sometimes grudgingly so. The condemnation of Islam for its treatment of women, especially combined with a continuing indulgence of the signifier of female enslavement (the harem, the veil, polygamy) helped to obscure and legitimize sexual and cultural repression of women from a Eurocentric point of view. Against the colonial backdrop, the role and status of the Muslim women became a stick with which the West would beat the East. In almost all the societies, cultural beliefs surrounding female sexuality have been a battleground of perceptions. It is understood as a site of motherhood, wifehood, purity, modesty and lastly as a repository of a particular culture's traditional values. However, female sexuality or the control of it finds an even more complex political meaning in Islamic societies. Seen as the symbol of Islamic social order and cultural continuity, restraining and disciplining female sexuality seems to run along the line of bifurcation-- between Muslim culture and non-Muslim other.

Even though it approves and celebrates sexual pleasure, Islamic orthodox views have also developed a justification for sexual hierarchy with the idea of women as primarily sexual object. The most popular concept regarding sexuality and Islam is coupled with gender discrimination in the realm of sexual love and desire, means that even though unlike Judaism or Christianity or other traditional religion, Islam recognizes sexual desire and the need for fulfilment for both the sexes. But it makes it harder for women to achieve sexual agency in practice. Female sexual drives and women's right to sexual fulfilment is recognized and legally sanctioned through marriage. Women may at one and the same time "desire sexual intercourse" while "not hoping to be selected for marriage", is the only mainstream legitimate Qur'anic space for intercourse outside marriage.(Wadud 193)The fear of female sexuality and concerns over women's moral conduct or modesty are not just restricted to orthodox views of a bygone era. Certain modern practices take their legitimacy from the idea that female sexuality needs to be tamed. These realities raise several questions as to what cultural and religious suppositions and political circumstances have acted in the present time as the authority of female sexuality. These questions, in the end merge with the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements all over the world, especially in contemporary Middle Eastern and North African societies. Because of the ideological centrality of communal dignity, the notion of female sexuality has gone through a drastic change in the process of radical Islamization of the existing Muslim societies. Islamic fundamentalists have traditionally drawn androcentric interpretations of Qur'an and Hadith to explain the historical subjugation of women in Islamic societies. Although different interpretations and traditions within Islam make it hard to come to a generalized conclusion, it can be said Islam is a sex affirming cultural and religious tradition. Islamic attitudes towards sexual pleasure can be understood to be a major dividing line between Islam and other religions. In a feminist reading of the Qur'an Asma Barlas argues that the Qur'an does not stigmatize sex. Unlike other monotheistic traditions like Christianity or Judaism, Islam talks about a concept of *sukun*[xxiii], which is translated as a deep intimacy resulting from a fulfilling sexual relationship. In fact, rather than viewing human sexuality as an expression of man's bestial nature to be understood in opposition to the preoccupations of the higher spiritual self, the Qur'an sees sexual union as the very foundation on which deep human connections are established, central to the formation and survival of enduring communities. Furthermore, the Qur'an grants to men and women analogous sexual natures, recognizing thereby women's right to sexual fulfilment as much as men's. However, Barlas is quick to point out that the Qur'an's liberal and inclusive sexual ideology has been misrepresented and misused in the practices of Muslim patriarchies through history. (Barlas 2011: 135-136)

However, it is important to comprehend the context of sexual praxis: Barlas makes clear that sexual experience is legitimized only within the contractual bounds of marriage. She points out the Prophet's many injunctions against the practice of adultery. The Qur'an does not equate chastity with virginity, nor does it place the burden of sexual morality on women alone, allowing men unmitigated license in sexual practices. On the subject of homosexuality, however, she remains silent, neither affirming nor denying the place of same-sex desire within the parameters of divine prescription.

At first glance, scholars who move beyond chronicling total erasure to a grudging recognition of same-sex desire seem to offer only additional repressive tendencies. Considerations of homosexuality in Islam's foundational texts have all too often rested on the famous story of the people of Lot, whose violent destruction by the wrath of Allah is read as the Qur'an's absolute and unambiguous injunction against the practice of sodomy. However, more careful considerations of the subject of homosexuality in the Qur'an, as well as in the early traditions of the ahadith and stories of the life of the Prophet, reveal a somewhat more complicated picture, leading some scholars to the conclusion that the Prophet not only recognized the possibility of same-sex desire among males but also that the Prophet was at times remarkably mild in the censure of homosexuality compared to other forms of sexual transgressions (such as fornication). In the larger tradition of Islam, the challenges to normative heterosexuality have found many different expressions, not the least of which is the homoerotic imagery in many strands of Sufi mysticism. When we turn to the female subject, however, the picture has been rather murky until recently .Islamic orthodox injunctions, often grounded in ahadith of questionable authenticity, and Western feminist intervention, frequently colored by orientalist perspectives (Habib 59). A broad range of sources, from folklore to medieval erotology, reveals a more permissive early Islam, tolerant even of the practices of female homosexuality. Medieval Arab culture possessed a certain knowledge and understanding of diverse sexual practices; this culture allowed openness and visibility to communities of ‘deviant women’ and was far more flexible on the issues of sexual pleasure than is suggested by contemporary religious orthodoxies as well as by Western scholarship.(Mitra 312)

I have put together the feminist interpretation of the Qur’an and several Islamic customs along with Muslim writings from the twentieth century, in answer to one of my research questions—how does feminist interpretation of religious texts interpret the sexual cultures of twentieth century? I am not claiming that Begum Jaan, Shaman or Aftab Begum made an informed decision based on their politics. But the methodology I am talking about encourages an ‘Indecent Theology’ in Islam, a term coined by Maria Althaus-Reid. Her book *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* is a step in the direction of liberating 'sexuality' (and all that it signifies) from the narrow confines of the heteronormative narrative. It situates itself at the intersection of Latin American Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Continental Philsophy, Postcolonial and Sexual Theory, and Systematic Theology. Althaus-Reid brings all of her theoretical depository to decode the problem of theology as a ‘sexual normative ideology’ and unveils the undercurrent of sexual desire in theological discourse. Systematic theology has always been done in the mode of heterosexual desire, constructing the sexual other as a boundary by which to define what is acceptable and meaningful. Viewing theology as a sexual act is recognizing the imperial character of its sexual orthodoxy and orthopraxy and being willing to ‘come out’ of the ideological closet it constructs by refusing to comply with mainstream public theology. In so doing, the theologian affirms his or her sexuality in their choice of theological topics or motifs and the content of their reflection instead of allowing the dominant (hetero)sexual paradigm to decide for them. Althaus- Reid’s theorization is strictly situated in a Christian paradigm. If I transport this idea of perverted theology to the context of this chapter, it may help us in pondering over the sexual transgressions of Begum Jaan or Shaman. Indecent Theology enables us to problematize and undress the multiple mythical layers of Islam in this case. It opens up the discussion of a theology which, finding its point of departure at the crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer thinking, can reflect on economic and theological oppression with passion and imprudence. An ‘Indecent Theology’ will question the traditional Indian subcontinental field of decency and order as it permeates and supports the multiple (ecclesiological, theological, political and amatory) structures of life. It leads us towards a theology of no scholars, no authorities of any kind; that is not given from above, but starts from grounds and basements, with people's lives and critical experiences without censorship. A theology that invites people to come as they are, and to come out of all the closets they are living in. A theology of liberation made from subjectivities and the stories of individuals can result from personal agency to build a safe habitat according to social class, race, language, gender, identity, lifestyle and particular quirks. If Islamic feminisms declare themselves a movement and a perspective of dissent from patriarchy in Islam, then Islamic feminisms should be queer feminism based on an ‘Indecent Theology’. (Vanessa Rivera de la Fuente 3) It is not stability but a sense of discontinuity that is most valuable in theology. The continuousness of the hermeneutical circle of suspicion and the perennial questioning of the explanatory narratives of reality implies, precisely, a process of theological discontinuity and the subsequent deconstruction of androcentric theology.

‘Neoconservative’ Feminism: Conversations from the Twenty-First Century

The expansion of postmodern critiques of Enlightenment rationality has raised questions about established ways of thinking about secularism and feminism and has forced us to re-examine the overlapping conflicts of women's claim on feminism. I have mentioned these conflicts through my earlier chapters. But this has been intensified by the conflation of Islam with the threat of terrorism and a preoccupation with policing Muslim women's dress. Post 9/11[xxiv], these issues have caused a consternation in different parts of the world and secular-liberal governance in the western world has tried its best to keep cultural markers of Islam at bay. The headscarf debate has become a powerful motif in pan-European debates on multi- culturalism, symbolizing the challenges posed by new patterns of religious diversity to ostensibly European values. In this discursive milieu, two interrelated sites of contestation feature prominently: a European secular public space and the veiled Muslim woman, whose presence is construed as threatening to the supposed secularity of the public sphere, the norm of gender equality and, potentially, the security of the nation. Now, the concept of feminism has been originated in the West and the pioneering theorisation and the execution have come from there. This research particularly looks at the ensuing debate of religion and feminism as reflected in literature as sociological writings from the subcontinent. Conflicts between the claims of women's equality and the claims of religion have been documented in all major discussions regarding the two across all regions. The headscarf debate has not occurred in South-Asia but there have been other variations of this kind of debate. Women from the global south, particularly Muslim women in this discussion continue to be constructed as passive, oppressed and incapable of forming their own feminist theorisation or movement. Feminist theorists have addressed the oppressive dimensions of religion in a number of ways. Most Anglo-American feminist political theorizing seems to take for granted, either implicitly or explicitly, that the public and societal relevance of religion will be inevitably diminished as a consequence of modernization. Modernization is always thought as a unidimensional process where the discussions of religion and lived realities are kept at a distance. I discussed this particular point in detail while critiquing Ruth Vanita's way of discussing *Rekhti* in the backdrop of a city which is transitioning to modernity and the narrative of a single modernity wherein religion is expected to become a much diminished and private aspect of people's lives.

As I have progressed through this research, I have attempted to scrutinize the modalities of Islamic sexuality on the Indian subcontinent over roughly three centuries. This chapter records travel writings of Muslim women from the beginning of the twenty first century and how they have experienced varying forms of Islam. Now, Islamic feminism is at a nascent stage on the Indian subcontinent and its growth is mostly restricted to academia. Along with Nighat M.Gandhi and Anees Jung whose texts I will primarily be looking at, I shall discuss Islamic feminists from the subcontinent who have talked about their curious collaboration with the project. This chapter looks at literary works of the twenty first century where believing women have gone through the dilemma of calling themselves 'feminists'. This records narratives from a time when Islamic Feminism has emerged globally and its tenets are available to Muslim women of global south. The first part of this chapter focuses on the figure of an Islamic feminist located in a secular-liberal academic sphere and the second part looks at writings. It is debatable whether Islamic Feminism has reached a theoretical dead end and is impossible to implement in practical life but it is worth pondering how it has influenced Muslim lives on Indian subcontinent, at least a certain section of it.

It is crucial to understand how the liberal discourse on freedom that has taken a prevalent role in various traditions of feminist thought can blind us towards other non-liberal forms of religiosity that governs many women's lives. Why is this tendency so pertinent in the twenty first century? First, following the event of 9/11, several authors decided to capitalize on the anti-Muslim sentiment that swept the global scene. These authors scored points with the right wing with abrasive comments on Muslim barbarity and misogyny. Saba Mahmood in the essay *Religion, Feminism, and Empire: The New Ambassadors of Islamophobia* notes one such author, Hirsi Ali who publicly stated 'Muslims lag in enlightened thinking, tolerance and knowledge of other cultures'. Irshad Manji is another writer whose text *The Trouble with Islam* is peppered with phrases like 'brain-dead', 'narrow-minded', 'incapable of thinking', 'hypocritical' that were used to used to describe Muslim sensibility.(Mahmood 2004: 22, 30, 31) Islam was branded as more literalist, rigid, intolerant, hateful of women and homosexuals than ever before. Mahmood calls this political tendency, 'neoconservatism' (Mahmood 82, 83). Second, beginning of this century saw debates regarding the showcasing of one’s religious practice in the public sphere, piety movements led by women in different parts of the world and the consequential birth of Islamic feminism.

The feminist academic sphere is at a curious juncture. It is fraught with complex ideological differences between feminists, as well as fundamental differences of location among women, which mean very different access to all kinds of resources. This isolation is caused by dominant secular-liberal discourses that dictate certain subjects to be unfit for the feminist project. The ‘totalizing’ tendencies of earlier feminist theorizing has been challenged from within feminism by marginalized, colonized and indigenous women, who objected to feminist theories which failed to address their problems. Even after the post-feminist theorization on the cultural assault that liberal secular politics commits, the epistemological violence is still prevalent. When it comes to believing men/women, they are constantly frowned upon. In academia or the arena of feminist activism, they are constantly faced with questions. An exhausting practice of self-explanation (or the resultant doubt) is jeopardizing their confidence or self-worth.

Many Islamic feminists have decisively renounced the term ‘feminist’. In every academic seminar or conference, they feel, it is absolutely mandatory to explain why they have resisted the term ‘feminist’. Academia is fraught with these tensions. This chapter tries to pick up the tension, the anxiety, the unease, the unheard struggles that a hegemonic secular-liberal politics can inflict on Islamic feminists. Often these anxieties are not part of their main academic theorization, but tucked away in the nooks and crannies of preface or introduction where they talk about their personal experiences with academia, their insecurities, distrust that is inflicted upon their politics and their way of coming to terms with the feminist academic sphere. Somehow there is a fear that the feminist academy has fallen a prey to the totalitarian culture that it set out to refute. This brings one to a fundamental question, what are the qualities one must possess to be considered a feminist? Is feminism only a leftist secular project? What are the parameters of an accepted form of feminism? Is a non-oppressive feminist philosophy and politics that both retain a commitment to women's rights and actively respects women's cultural differences possible? If so, what are its principles and modalities?

Saba Mahmood in *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* analyzes how modern secular governance has aggravated religious polarization. She extensively discusses how modern secularism has transformed religious identity and interfaith relations in postcolonial Egypt after it has been introduced in nineteenth century. Now, in this chapter I will focus on how the feminist academic sphere has accommodated this secular liberal ideology, eventually obfuscates the discussion of Islamic feminism and female sexuality in twenty first century India. The governing secular–liberal practice of academia is not beyond problematization. Freedom, democracy and tolerance that come to play constructive roles in academia, have been used as a diagnosis as well as a strategic point of intervention for restructuring Islamic feminists’ politics. As a community, academia exerts immense pressure on its members. Certain subjective qualities, beliefs and lifestyles are censored in the process and certain ways of expressing the self in the public forum are imposed. In this section, I would like to put emphasis on feminist academic sphere. By the aforementioned sphere, I specifically mean a collective where professors, scholars, students and activists avowedly share a critical belief in feminism as a political force.

In the preface to *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* Saba Mahmood expresses her initial difficulty with Islamic feminism. She writes,

> The reason progressive leftists like myself have such difficulty recognizing these aspects of Islamic revival movements, I think, owes in part to our profound dis-ease with the appearance of religion outside of the private space of individualized belief. For those with well-honed secular-liberal and progressive sensibilities, the slightest eruption of religion into the public domain is frequently experienced as a dangerous affront, one that threatens to subject us to a normative morality dictated by mullahs and priests. This fear is accompanied by a deep self-assurance about the truth of the progressive-secular-imaginary, one that assumes that the life forms it offers are the best way out for these unenlightened souls, mired as they are in the spectral hopes that gods and prophets hold out to them. Within our secular epistemology, we tend to translate religious truth as force, a play of power that can be traced back to the machinations of economic and geopolitical interests. (Mahmood 2005: xi)

She focussed on the Islamist movement in Egypt, a place distant from the land of her birth, and its formative political struggles indicate the political and intellectual dislocations that were needed to think through the conundrum. Egypt did not face an immediate situation for civil war under the military dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq(1977-1988) who used Islam to reinforce his powerful grip over Pakistan. Egypt did not claim an urgency of political closure or strategic action which made it more conducive to study. This seems to be an answer to the mystery of the unavailability of research on Islamic feminism on the Indian subcontinent. Saba Mahmood seems not to be the only theorist who had overcome the anxiety with Islamic feminism. Like Mahmood, Asma Barlas is originally from Pakistan and has hardly talked about the necessity of Islamic feminist discussion on the subcontinent. She has constantly questioned the efficiency of the 'feminist' tag for women of the global south and Middle East. As someone who practices Islam, Asma Barlas finds it hard to call herself a 'feminist'. She expresses her awkwardness in explaining her resistance to feminism in any academic seminar. In the essay *Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing feminism as a master narrative*, she narrates her tumultuous relationship with feminism in the academic sphere—as she calls it 'Four Stages of Denial or my On-again, Off-again, Affair with Feminism.'(Kynsilehtto 3) She notes down stages of her anxiety in four phases. She posited herself away from the project of feminism as a believing woman. But after the publication of her first book, her ideologies of gender equality based on Islam were termed as feminist. She expresses her unease through phrases like *"What?* How can people call me a feminist when I'm calling myself a believing woman?" "How can other people tell me *what* I am and *what* I'm doing?" "So *what* if I use some of the same language as feminists? Can't one do that without buying into an entire ontology or epistemology!" *"What?!* Do feminists think that they discovered equality and patriarchy?!" And, eventually, "so *what* if they did? I derive *my* understanding of equality and of patriarchy from the Qur'an, not from any feminist text!"(Kynsilehtto 16)

Her indignation grew with the unwanted tag of feminism. In the second stage, she begins to categorically point out the reason for her resistance. In part, her resistance was a displacement of frustration with real, live, feminists, all of them white. Many of them seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of women of colour. In an interview, she says,

> At the other end of the spectrum are secular feminists who contend that the only way to ensure equality and rights is through secularism, not Islam, and they find any mention of Islam as liberatory "mind-boggling", as a Pakistani feminist said in Barcelona. One is not obliged to think of Islam as liberatory, of course, but I can't help wondering what it means to be a "practicing feminist" (as she described herself) in a society that is 98% Muslim without engaging its

> basic beliefs. Feminism, after all claims to be a social practice, not merely a form of personal identity.(The Guardian, Web)

Anyone who has been silenced in the name of sisterhood can understand how strange and difficult that is and it wasn't until she read black feminists like bell hooks who could give voice to her discomfort at being seen as the Sister Other. It was hard for her to celebrate feminisms' liberatory stance when liberation entailed a loss of voice and loss of a sense of self for women like her and it has taken some practice to look beyond actual feminists to appreciate certain feminist principles. She justifies her standpoint, by saying,

> I guess many of you must feel the same way when you hear me speak about the Qur'an's liberatory stance in the face of Muslim misogyny. It must be equally hard for you to look beyond the reality of Muslims to the theory and potential of Islam. But, of course, there are always slippages between theory and practice and, in theory; I have always been committed to the concept of sexual equality, which is at the core of feminist theory.(Kynsilehtto 17)

She believes that Islam is thought to be inherently gender unjust because of how it has been traditionally read. Texts are always interpreted from and within specific material and ideological sites. Especially where the Qur'an is concerned, a whole host of scholars has shown that it has been continually de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the light of Muslim sexual politics. And this politics is overwhelmingly male-centric. At the third stage, she begins collaborating with feminist historian Margot Badran who defines Islamic feminism as 'discourse of gender equality that derives its mandate from the Qur'an and seeks rights and justice for all human beings across the totality of the public-private continuum.'(Badran 7) Barlas was constantly troubled by the need for a common language that feminism dictates. She feels, for analytical reasons, the term Islamic Feminism should be firmly claimed and repeatedly explained. The language of feminism does not always allow to explore commonalities and, more to the point, that shared languages also create analytical and political problems. Therefore, if feminist academics want to build solidarity with Muslim women, they need more than the shared discourse of feminism. They need to be able to understand the specificity of their movements. It has been an obstacle to some conversations that many feminists, whether activists or academics, have tended to read 'religion' as an abstraction solely in negative terms-- reading 'religion' only as a constraint ideologically and institutionally, and reading the embrace of religious affiliations or allegiances as a sign of false consciousness. This negative rendering of 'religion' is in many respects an ironic holdover from feminism's own Enlightenment inheritance. In its obsession with secularizing Islam to avoid religious fundamentalism, the secular-liberal politics of western feminism(s) is still hung over Enlightenment's modernizing project. In Barlas' words,

> Granted feminism isn't a direct heritage of the Enlightenment, but, as long as it functions as a universalizing political theory, I don't think it can accommodate the "diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to 'world the earth' in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging.(Kynsilehtto 22)

In much of feminist academic practice, there is an absolute absence of Islamic feminism or any other non-western form of feminism in university curriculum. A lot of scholars build their ideologies without investigating Islamic feminism in their preliminary years of academia. Even if they are mentioned in classrooms, they are mostly shown as derivatives of Western Feminism or as the resultant emergence of the cultural assault that western feminisms committed. Raja Rhouni in the preface to her work *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* expresses her indignation at this. The tenets of western feminism that were taught as part of her undergraduate course never excited her. It was not until her post-graduation when she stumbled upon works of Fatima Mernissi, that she found feminism can be comingled with religion, with Islam in this particular case. In her words,

> I had been introduced to feminism a year or two before in a literary course, which, despite its value, often focused on American or French feminisms; the issues we covered seemed to me, and I presume to a lot of my classmates, far away from Moroccan reality. The disinterest and oft en distrust of feminism by my classmates, especially my male classmates, largely stemmed from this particular focus. With hindsight, I think that Mernissi's work, if taught, would have significantly changed my classmates' negative assumptions about feminism, especially the commonly held idea that feminism describes a war against men and Islam, waged by Western and Westernized bourgeois women, advocating sexual promiscuity. If my classmates and I had studied, for instance, Mernissi's *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*, based on her pioneering interviews with mostly rural and poor urban women, we would have realized that her work is for the most part about foregrounding the voices of underprivileged Moroccan women, subject to a combination of class and gender marginalization. This aspect of Mernissi's scholarship was one of my motivations, among many, to write a dissertation on her work.(Rhouni xi)

Rhouni agrees that Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* did not answer all her queries and hence her quest did not end there. The new vision of Islam as a religion with a message of gender equality, eased some of the aching anger she had. Whether or not believing or practicing, Islam is part of her identity, her way of life, a culture, a system of values. She might be at ease with it or find her position painful and ambiguous. But at least, she found academic speculation over a culture that formed the core of her identity.

Margot Badran remembers the bumpy road that she crossed as a young scholar who was new in the emergent field of Islamic feminism. They were fretting over the rhetorical structure, contesting homogenized subcategory of 'the Muslim woman' and simultaneously were attempting to come up with new methodologies that are based on a post-foundationalist critique of Islam. It was hard to reconcile their experiences as academics with the women they met in the most humble spheres of life. They were infuriated by the casual presumption that Muslim women do not know their rights. Their intellectual journey was directed to debunk this disjuncture between their experiences and public attitude. As an anthropologist, these struggles were expressed more vividly in Lila Abu-Lughod's narratives. She writes,

> By presenting women's dreams, desires, anger, and disappointments— in their own words— I hoped to lay to rest some stereotypes…The individuality of these women's experiences and their reflections on life and relationships challenged what I felt was anthropology's tendency to typify cultures through social scientific generalizations. I imagined feminists as another audience for my second book; I hoped that the narratives would persuade them that it is not so easy to talk about "patriarchy" or to put one's finger on how power works. I wanted my years of research to offer something unusual to a public that had little understanding of, but strong views about women in the Middle East. Trying to remain true to my experiences of living in this small community in Egypt for so many years— watching children grow up, women struggle to build families, people figure out how to realize their dreams, relationships and roles shift, and hopes sometimes turn to resignation— I did my best to convey the texture of "life as lived.(Lughod 5,6)

On that note, I come to the second part of this chapter, the anthropological study of Muslim women in the subcontinent. To look into the scopes of Islamic feminism in the texture of 'life as lived', I follow the methodology of Lila Abu Lughod. In the foreward to *Night of the New Moon: Encounters with Muslim Women in India,* Anees Jung unveils the conflicting face of Muslim women behind the black burqa. How does a Muslim woman look? What is it that makes her distinguishable among all others? Is it the withdrawn resilient face that has lived a life of martyrdom? Or, is it a face that reflects the day to day subversions and reappropriation of her faith?

The book is a collection of thirty-three essays tied together with an equally brusque foreward and afterward. Each essay is a pen sketch or an encounter with an

Indian Muslim that highlights her religious identity. All the encounters occur in the home of a particular woman and even though the narrative is only partially in direct speech, they read like testimonials in which each proponent identifies her personal beliefs. The book was published in 1993 and does not fall under the category of books written in the twenty first century. But I have attempted to put this book along with Nighat M Gandhi's *Alternative Realities: Love in the Lives of Muslim women* (2013) for my discussion. Jung does not really state any narrative of subversion or resistance in the lives of Muslim women per se, but she depicts how Islam is an integral part of their lives. The essays begin with encounters in the city of Hyderabad and later move on to other states like Orissa, Bhopal and Rajasthan. The women in the essays cut across economic class, ranging from very poor religious devotee at a shrine to an aristocratic Begum. For instance when she talks to Najma Heptullah, Najma talks insightfully about her childhood, the days when her grandmother, sister of Maulana Azad, would be an inspector of schools during the reign of Sultan Jehan Begum. "For a woman to be educated in Bhopal was not an exception but the rule….Women were never barred from the mosque, only exempted."(47) This rings a bell today as women across the country seek to have their own space in mosques, arguing vociferously with Maulanas. Then at the other extreme, Anees presents a nine-year-old in Bombay, visiting a famous shrine. Asked, what she would pray for, the little girl replies, a black satin burqa. For her, the burqa was not a garb that locked her out of the world, it was a gift. The Begum in Bhopal had adjusted to a life of sharing her husband with other women. Many years removed from the age of royalty, she never stepped out of her 'golden cage'. When her husband was stripped of his title, she remained untouched by the loss. Even after all the years of suffering she never broke down in front of the world. The Begum says it all: "One cries before Allah not in front of fellow human beings…Never let your heart be empty of God. Only He stays. All else is *fanna,* that extinction which marks the end of all human journeys."(19, 20)

Furthermore, at certain points the author's personal preferences transcend the general mood of writing. The book begins with the promise to inquire into the mosaic nature of Islam in India. In the preface Anees Jung writes,

> I decided to look beyond this face that marks a Muslim woman. I began with my mother. In my own home, my own town. Then I travelled to towns where other Muslim women live. I went to Lucknow, heartland of Indian Islam, to Bhopal where the faith survives with dignity, nursing the memory of queens who ruled the state. I travelled distances—to the edges of the Rann of Kutch, into the desert where women practise a pristine Islam; down to the coastal region of Kerala where through the centuries different faiths have arrived by ocean routes. I found the Islam of Kerala as gentle as the green landscapes of the place. It seemed less insular, less vociferous. Its spirit was strong but its face gentle, mellower with the mingling. As it was in Bengal where women of Islam lived, receptive to streams of reform movements, and a vibrant Bengali culture. I met women on several levels—in the city, living in ghettos, in hovels and in mansions and in the countryside where faith grows out of rivers and fields. I talked with women of letters who have analysed Islam, and watched those who live Islam without having read *Koran* or the *Hadith*, the saying of the prophet. I met some who were rich and privileged and many who were poor and deprived among whom I found a faith at once intimate and fervent. Whatever the level and whoever the region, I discovered that the Muslim woman was not an insubstantial figure disappearing behind the veil, but a person, more substantial than the book. She was a state of mind. The pages that follow are an attempt to reveal the feminine face of Islam as I have seen it in India. (xii)

The exuberance of the early pages ends on a dispirited note. I cannot blame Jung for what the personal narratives have revealed but how she has chosen to position the narrative at the end-- it seems like a defeatist tone that sets the final character of this work.

> According to Jilani the hold of religion is more on Muslim women than men. All the rules and regulations imposed by mullahs start and end with women. Women, they say, should stay at home, wear a burqa when they go out, should not go out alone, not talk to a man in public or study in a class alongside men.

> A Muslim woman finds herself an easy victim" (61). Her findings are further expressed in her closing words: "They have no command over it [their state of being] for it is achieved not by knowledge but obedience. In a changing environment such a way of being offers no technique that spurs understanding of realities beyond the individual self. Nor does it help illumine [sic] the social order. When you live with a wall around you nothing can enter or go out. When you do not live a truth, it dies. Like praying in the dark…(127)

It is unfortunate how the jubilant tone died in the course of her narrative. I would like to place this writing in juxtaposition with Nighat M. Gandhi's *Alternative Realities: Love in the Lives of Muslim Women*. As I have mentioned earlier, this defeatist tone on behalf of Muslim women is part of a trend. I am not comparing Anees Jung's ending to other Islamophobic traditions of writing. But as overwrought memoirs by Muslim women recounting their oppression at the hands of Islam have become quick bestsellers in the west and surfaced in the global south as well, more women are dragged from their homes or collaterally killed and a more anti-woman, anti-queer extremism is inspired among this generation. Painting the image of a pair of helpless eyes behind the black burqa has become a norm when it comes to a discussion of Muslim women. Even though narratives of Muslim women's oppression have been opportunistically used to serve a political agenda, this does not deny the fact that Muslim women are subjected to violence in the name of religious norms. It is also important to understand how selective elisions and inaccuracies in the accounts have helped secure a monochromatic image of Islam. As Mahmood writes,

> The point I am making here is rather simple and straightforward: no discursive object occupies a simple relation to the reality it purportedly denotes. Rather, representations of facts, objects, and events are profoundly mediated by the fields of power in which they circulate and through which they acquire their precise shape and form. Consequently, contemporary concern for Muslim women is paradoxically linked with, and deeply informed by, the civilizational discourse through which the encounter between Euro-America and Islam is being framed right now. Feminist contributions to the vilification of Islam do

> no service either to Muslim women or to the cause of gender justice. Instead they re-inscribe the cultural and civilizational divide that has become the bedrock not only of neoconservative politics but also of liberal politics in this tragic moment in history. (Mahmood 2011: 90)

Each religion that has sprung from the Bible—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—has used the faith to denigrate women. The core of fundamentalism is the effort to define the fundamentals of a religious system and adhere to them. The term fundamentalism covers a wide spectrum, from religious revivalism to extremist political movements. In this case, I use “fundamentalism” in the sense of a political ideology rooted historically in specific social and cultural environments of a religious community. Fundamentalism exists in every religion and it is not peculiar to an Islamic context but the application of the term has been particularly used in demonizing Islam.(Shirazi 2)

Nighat M Gandhi's *Alternative Realities: Love in the Lives of Muslim Women* is a travelogue, a memoir, a satire and a feminist critique of Muslim women's lives. It is interwoven with the author's own ongoing struggle as a Muslim woman in the twenty first century. Each chapter presents a personal story of women living in cities, small towns and villages in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh-- the three lands to which Nighat Gandhi belongs. In writing their stories, she attempts to break the silence enshrouding Muslim women's sexuality, and the ways in which they negotiate the restrictions placed on their freedoms within the framework of their culture. Before I delve into the thematic exploration of the narratives, it is important to establish the time period. Post 9/11, the stereotypical image of Muslim women surfaced even in the global south. Nighat Gandhi writes why it became so compelling for her to gather the narratives of subversion from Muslim women across three countries. Burdened by the images of oppression, victimization and the unnecessary sensational media representation, she had to take the journey. She wandered for three years in her three homelands collecting the narratives. She met women in towns and villages of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and in their kitchens, courtyards, workplaces or any public places where women came together. She talked about love, loss and desire. The journey that she undertook began from within. The book begins with her struggle. Nighat Gandhi comes from a family that functioned under the rule of her despotic father. He was from Bangladesh and moved to Pakistan after 1971[xxv]. Zia-ul-Haq's brand of reactionary Islam helped strengthening her father's self-righteousness. His apparent liberalism came to a halt when his abroad educated daughter wanted to marry a Hindu. She was denied a chance to go back to Chicago to complete her education and was fed on religious fundamentalist teaching. Gandhi mentions that her mother was a complete puppet under the unyielding words of her father. What Nighat Gandhi went through, marks the beginning of the battle women go through for wanting to follow their desire. Her former teacher, fellow social worker—nobody came to her rescue. She had to flee from her home to end this tyranny. She chooses to begin her book with this journey, the journey that would change her life and would enable her to see the acts of resistance or subversion to salvage Muslim women's freedom of desire.

In the previous chapter I mentioned the rise of reform movements of women's rights during the colonial period. Whatever little freedom they acquired during this period, seemed to fade away with the rise of fundamentalist fixation with regulating women's freedom. Women positioned at a higher place in the class ladder still retained some freedom. Their rights to education or property remained unchallenged as long as they chose someone from the same class and caste. Gandhi cannot help but compare the scenario with Khadija, the Prophet's wife. Despite being twice widowed, she married someone who was fifteen year younger to her and successfully managed her own business.(Gandhi 36) The reason I chose Nighat M. Gandhi's work to deal with sexuality on the subcontinent is for the way she wrote on her own beliefs. It is difficult to analyze her sincerity towards Islam but throughout the text she uses anecdotes that lay the foundation of her Islamic feminism. An excerpt from Anees Jung's *Night of the New Moon: Encounters with Muslim Women in India* bears witness to this: while recording the narrative of a college student, Jung notes,

> 'I am a modern woman. But that does not mean I should be immodest. I can fight a battle wearing a burqa' says one Muslim college student. And yet I see

> loss of Islam in her daily rhythms, in her relations with her family and community. It still exists though on paper, in postulates to which she returns in times of crisis like going to a law court. Her Islam is no longer a force by which she lives each day. The extraneous demands of modern life push her to seek solutions that go beyond the framework of her faith. (Jung xi)

Who does not live beyond the framework of faith? Nighat Gandhi travels to her old homeland Pakistan to look for such narratives. While travelling to Oghi[xxvi], she compromises her independence because of the rampant religious tyranny and in short, to save the trouble. The practice of Islam between her and the co-traveller is drastically different. She is a little uncomfortable with the *chadar*[xxvii] and being stared at for having a sip of water during *Ramazan* but what startles me in the scenario is the strange familiarity between two strangers and the strange affection Gandhi feels after discovering her little act of audacity.

Gandhi's writing emanates a glow of solidarity among women-- women across differing age, language, class but bound together by acts of resistance--resistance to early pregnancy, resistance to familial tyranny and often resistance to the heteronormative ideals set by the society. Like the women of my previous chapters, they too live in a state of in-betweenness. They subvert and yet compromise. They are on the verge of formation like their ideology. While talking about Laila[xxviii], Nighat Gandhi writes,

> It takes me several days to understand the survival value of her pragmatic fatalism and her dance back and forth across thresholds of autonomy. Her feigned docility is wisdom she has absorbed from the tradition-encrusted chadar of her culture. It takes creativity to challenge the kind of unchanging social façade she is trapped in. But with each bold belief, even if she cannot always act on it, she is rending the fabric of millennia-old customs. (Gandhi 118)

At the end of the section named *Eid in Oghi,* Nighat Gandhi wonders whether the lack of sexual fulfilment and sexual intimacy drive men to have sex with men and women with women. As the patriarchal setup teaches men to be emotionally unresponsive towards their partners, they turn towards same sex partners to fill the void. These instances are not taken to be indication of homosexuality or bisexuality but are always present as the undercurrent of predominant heteronormative sexual culture.(131) At this point, I would like to stop and go back to Chughtai's depiction of Begum Jaan in *Lihaf*. Begum Jaan's homoerotic relationship with Rabbo is built on the backdrop of her non-existent heterosexual relationship with her husband. In *Siraat-e-Mustaqeem:The Straight Path*, Nighat Gandhi meets the young professor named Nusrat in Karachi. She was one of the few outed lesbians in Pakistan who was willing to talk to Gandhi for her research. On a humid late October afternoon, they meet at Nusrat's college where they begin to converse. They start discussing the depiction of sexuality in Indian literature and Chughtai's Lihaf comes up. Nusrat is of the opinion that 'Ismat Chughtai's depiction of love between women wasn't positive at all! She considered lesbianism an aberration from the norm—a social evil that erupts only when men fail to satisfy women's sexual needs.'(Gandhi 142) But Chughtai was still a writer who dared to talk about female sexuality in the twentieth century. In her later work *The Crooked Line*, we see female homoeroticism to be born not out of expediency but as Shaman's conscious decision. However, in Nighat Gandhi's story Nusrat narrates her relationship with Quratulain. She takes Nighat through her life, her struggles and desire. It is very difficult to miss the invisible thread connecting all the women in this anthropological work. Quratulain[xxix], Firdaus[xxx], Ghazala[xxxi] or Laila—all of them have been in heteronormative relationships or have come out of its shackles but beneath their experiences, lies the undercurrent of sexual awakening. They erupt in moments that are unexpected or never thought of.

Each of the women whose lives Gandhi has introduced, forces us to question dogmas. Each one teaches us something about the inadequacy of the contemporary understanding of Musim women's lived realities. Most have strong ideals of comportment and morality, work with laws and norms that distinguish men's and women's rights and responsibilities, and struggle with choices. I use their cases to bridge the gulf between the specific dilemmas and hardships they face in particular places and times and the common Western story of the hapless Muslim woman oppressed by her culture. The dynamics that shape Muslim women's rights and lives in the subcontinent are dizzying. She has gathered narratives of women from varying sectors that defied any boundary of location, class, gender, age and ideology. All of them take us through the journey called love and in a way express their disappointment with heteronormative idea of kinship.

It is intriguing to see how Nighat Gandhi has placed spirituality along with profanity or mundaneness in her study. For her, belief is like the small shrine of Shah Baba on platform number one of Allahabad station.(253) It is unceremonious. Gandhi thinks that the question of pollution comes up only when one tries to detach the sacred from the profane. Through her anthropological research, she ties to create a space of ambiguity. She questions the obsession with unidimensional faith. Why does one's feminism and faith need to collide? Why can't one's politics be born out of this duality? She writes,

> Dualisms are modernity's bane. Insisting on simplistic answers to complex phenomena, making relationships one-dimensional and flattening them out, rejecting the co-existence of contradictory truths—isn't that what legalistic religion does? Things have to be black and white. Fuzziness is intolerable. (Gandhi 44)

Muslim women are traditionally accorded with a perennial naiveté. It is assumed that they are unaware of their own bondage and hence need to be rescued. What strengthens the need to save Muslim women from their own culture is a deep-rooted assumption that Muslim societies are besotted with an ideology of fundamentalism whose worst victims are its female inhabitants. This judgment further entails the prescriptive vision that the solution lies in promoting 'democracy' in the Muslim world and Western values of 'freedom and liberty' through religious and cultural reform so that Muslims might be taught to discard their fundamentalist propensities and adopt more enlightened versions of Islam. Such cultural framing prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in that part of the world. Lila Abu- Lughod while talking about her anthropological methodology in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* writes,

> I called what I was doing ‘writing against culture.’ I was convinced that generalizing about cultures prevents us from appreciating or even accounting for people’s experiences and the contingencies with which we all live. The idea of culture increasingly has become a core component of international politics and common sense... They tell us there is an unbridgeable chasm between the West and the ‘Rest.’ Muslims are presented as a special and threatening culture— the most homogenized and the most troubling of the Rest. Muslim women, in this new common sense, symbolize just how alien this culture is. Western representations of Muslim women have a long history. Yet after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the images of oppressed Muslim women became connected to a mission to rescue them from their cultures. (Lila Abu-Lughod 6)

Instead of political and historical explanations, Islamic feminists were being asked to give religious or cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the examination of internal political struggles among Muslim communities in various parts of the world or of global interconnections between them and other nation- states, they were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres— re- creating an imaginative geography of West versus Islam. Even if many are willing to set aside the sensationalized stories of oppression that capture media attention and contribute to the widespread sense of certainty about the direness of the situation of ‘the Muslim woman’, most people still harbour a stubborn conviction that women’s rights should be restricted to the values of choice and freedom, and that these are deeply compromised in Muslim communities. This obsession with constraint is shared by outsiders and secular progressives within the Muslim world.

The prevailing circumstances in South-Asia make it difficult for its citizens to embrace secularism as a shared credo of life. The great majority of the people here are active adherents of some religious faith. The form or intensity of those belief-systems has always been variable. On the impossibility of secularization process, T.N Madan writes in “Secularism in its Place”,

> It is impracticable as a basis for state action for state action because Buddhism and Islam have been declared state or state-protected religions or because the stance of religious neutrality or equidistance is difficult to maintain since religious minorities do not share the majority’s view of what this entails for the state. And it is impotent as a blueprint for the future because, by its very nature, it is incapable of countering religious fundamentalism and fanaticism.
>
> Secularism is the dream of a minority that wishes to shape the majority in its own image, that wishes to impose its will upon history but lacks the power to do so under a democratically organized polity. In an open society the state will reflect the character of the society. Secularism is therefore a social myth that draws a cover over the failure of this minority to separate politics from religion in the society in which its members live.(Madan 298)

On that note I come to the crux of this thesis where I explain the failure of the concept of secularization in India. Unable to maintain the false façade of secularism in India, the modernist minority of India troubled with the anxiety of implementing it forcefully. Failure of secularism in India unmasks the failure of society and the state to bring under control the divisive forces that resulted in the partition of the subcontinent. And later, the tremendous efforts to foster a modern scientific temper in Jawaharlal Nehru’s model have also inspired the secular-liberal politics in academia. Despite the ongoing promotions of secularization, secularism as a widely shared worldview has failed to make a peaceful entry in India. (Madan 300) In an online journal named "Why Leftists and Liberals Need to Engage with Religion instead of Dismissing it", Ali Khan Mahmudabad writes,

> It was inevitable that both liberalism and various forms of communism and socialism would inevitably be elite discourses in post-colonial countries and in societies that had not organically incubated change. In post-independence India, for the vast majority of the people who had hitherto been at the service of landed elites, the only identity they could embrace fully was their religious identity. In other words, these ideological systems sought to impose their worldview on populations that had not gone through the structural changes that were required to truly benefit from them. The poverty and indeed the undoing, to a certain extent, of both liberal and leftist discourse has been that they have both failed to take into account that people's religious identities might very well be the primary identity through which they participate in politics.
>
> In a country like India, this has meant that the language and vocabulary deployed by liberals and leftists has deliberately not engaged with religious ideas and symbols in a society, which by all accounts is increasingly religious. Thus, in matters of ghar wapsi, love jihad and anti-Romeo squads, the volume of temple or mosque loudspeakers, meat bans and cow slaughter, graveyard walls and solar lights in mosques, the position of the liberal or leftist has been one of an arbitrator and not as someone who engages with and speaks the same vocabulary. (Huffpost, Web)

The intellectual conceit of the secular-liberal politics in India assumes that religion has no place in political life. Liberals and the left have created an almost unbridgeable gulf not only between themselves and a substantial part of the population but also between those political parties that have understood the primary importance of religion in people's lives. It is pertinent how the history of liberalism has been completely forgotten and misplaced on the subcontinent. The tenets of liberalism developed at a time in European history when imperial conquest and later colonialism were expanding. One important feature of classic liberal thought was that it assumed itself to be the natural outcome of the triumph of reason in post-enlightenment Europe.The discomfort with the homogenous understanding of modernization has left its mark in its attempt to reinterpret and reclaim religion in a feminist methodology. The point of departure has been the understanding that every theology implies a conscious or unconscious sexual or political praxis, based on reflections and actions from certain accepted social codifications. In this case, all the main narrators I have discussed in this chapter, Saba Mahmood, Asma Barlas, Anees Jung and Nighat Gandhi---look at this revolutionary theology as their politics to decode the language of secularism popularized by westernized intellectuals and education systems. It is discontinuity and not continuation which is valuable and transformative. The women Nighat M. Gandhi has talked about, their narratives of love, desire and faith have not mattered to the idea of Islam in the subcontinent or have not caused a flutter in the systematic theology of religious fundamentalism and yet these disjointed tales of desire are what I call the face of Islamic Feminism in a post 9/11 world. It is a world that has seen the ideology emerge amidst the rampant Islamophobic culture because Islamic feminism has the duty to take down the sensational demonic facade of it. The idea of Islam in the writings I have dealt with, is ever expansive. The definition of being a Muslim is not necessarily restricted to the followers of the Prophet. Muslim can be a non-specialized label, a label for any person who decides to submit itself to divine will.(Gandhi 355) Similarly, the assertion that there is only one interpretation of the Qur'an limits the extent of the text. The Qur'an must be flexible enough to accommodate innumerable cultural situations because of its claims to be universally beneficial to those who believe. I will conclude the dissertation with this epiphany where Islam can be seen as a purely spiritual state, a state of living in submission to the Truth and in that strain any believer can lay a claim to intersectional feminism.

Conclusion

How did I choose to write my dissertation on a subject that is burdened with endless debate? Now that militant Hindu right wing politics is at the helm in India, I think again and again, what would it be like to be an Islamic feminist in India? After all the theorization and recontextualization, the problem that remains, is the problem of implementing and accommodating this politics. As I hear of Hafiz Junaid, a Muslim boy of sixteen lynched in a local train in Delhi two days before Eid[xxxii], this attempt of revisioning an Islamic framework to struggle toward an understanding of egalitarian and pluralistic Islam, seems childishly hopeful and idealistic. When a Muslim in India is lynched on the mere suspicion of consuming beef or trading in livestock, when a Muslim can be thrown out of a legislature or thrashed simply for refusing to obey demands that they chant a slogan, when the chief minister of the state of U.P openly threatens to dig up Muslim women's corpses and get them raped, when being a Muslim itself is simply considered an anomaly--how can Muslim men/women reclaim a pluralistic vision of Islam? And how can I, as a non-Muslim, hope to reconstitute understandings of a contemporary Islamic feminism through the reading of some texts and tropes from India, and except to retrieve a few answers that are different from prevailing notions of both Islam and feminism in the jingoistic Hindu climate of the country today?

In concluding this dissertation, I will look at the scope and ways of enhancing this study in the future. It is an eclectic rumination in which I will attempt to highlight some strands from this dissertation that can take this study forward. I will look at new possibilities of collaborations between women's studies and Islamic studies for the emergence of other paradigms attending to the relationship between theory and practice to situate women’s networks within the framework of women’s agency in the context of Islam and feminism.

I ended my last chapter in a movement toward intersectional feminism, with an awareness of the critiques directed at intersectionality now. Since the 1990s, multiple strands of feminism have shown a willingness to engage in self-criticism. There have been attempts to deconstruct all-encompassing theories and concepts and their earlier commitment towards universalizing perspectives. But despite the introspective speculation and inclusion, Islamic feminism stands in a curious position and the term is not as self-explanatory as it may suggest. Certainly, it is not just about articulating women's experience and resistance in religious terms. In fact, 'Islamic' in 'Islamic Feminism' raises many questions and creates differing camps because of their political standpoints. For instance, what kinds of 'Islam' and what sorts of relations are presumed before going into the details of their specific politics? Do we mean 'Islam' as a medium uniting women and spirituality, in response to personal, gender-specific needs, or does the term instead entail a prescribed set of ideas, teachings, texts as applied to women?

It is important to remember, as I have mentioned before, that there is no coherent, self-identified and/or easily identifiable 'Islamic Feminist' ideology and movement operating within the boundaries of Islamic societies. The term has been the subject of much ideological, political and theoretical debate but as a concept, Islamic feminism from the beginning was adopted and pushed from outside Islamic societies. By, 'outside Islamic societies', I mean it is a politics based on the eclectic study of

Islam in an expansive manner, which in turn is predicated on constant reclamation and reinterpretation. It has been the work, mainly, of diasporic feminist academics and researchers from Muslim backgrounds, living and working in the West (e.g. Saba Mahmood, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud and others). The debate started with an obsession in the Western public sphere to keep at bay all the markers of Islamic religiosity. Islamic societies in South-Asia, the immediate location of this research, do not have a particular methodology or history of activism available to them on this front. It is pertinent to not confuse Islam as belief and personal choice, with Islam as law, as state religion. We are frequently confronted with usages that blur this distinction. The theoretical references that I have been giving throughout these chapters are not based in South-Asia. Muslim women activists in India do not have to contend with the force of an authoritarian Islamic state which activists from Pakistan or Bangladesh would have to whereas Muslim activists of India face the extremely polarised socio-political situation in India.

Islamic feminist activism in India is not yet an organized 'social movement', in the strict sense of that term. It is being pursued by a rather amorphous assortment of individuals and groups, all engaged in avid discussion and debate about the negative impact of Muslim Personal Law on women but only loosely organized in terms of action. These women share similar goals-to spread awareness of 'the correct teachings of Islam' about women's rights and find ways to help women gain practical access to them. Even though most of them work quite independently or in small groups, they are well aware of one another and even those living in distant places find or create periodic opportunities to meet and exchange ideas. Sometimes they combine forces, often in cooperation with sympathetic secular feminist organisations, to call a press conference, draw up and submit a petition or demonstrate publicly against some perceived threat, whether from the state or from orthodox religious forces, to Muslim women's welfare. How many are involved in this nascent movement is impossible to gauge. Muslim women’s rights activists in India have asserted their rights to embrace a feminist reading of Qur’an. In thus insisting on going back to the foundational Islamic text for guidance, they are constanyly reclaiming the right to *ijtihad* that the Sunni establishment maintans was foreclosed many centuries ago. (Vatuk 495)

No method of Qur'anic exegesis is fully objective. Each exegete makes some subjective choices and stresses on them. Some details of their interpretations reflect their subjective choices and not necessarily the intent of the text. As Amina Wadud categorises interpretations of women in the Qur'an into three categories: traditional, reactive and holistic. In short, 'traditional' interpretations are exclusively written by males. With the changing political scenario, with the onset of Islamic reform or fundamentalism, the rhetoric has changed but women and women's experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision. The second category of Qur'anic interpretation concerned with the issue of woman consists primarily of modern scholars' reactions to severe handicaps for woman as an individual and as a member of society which have been attributed to the text. The interpretations which reconsider the whole method of Qur'anic exegesis with regard to various modern social, moral, economic, and political concerns—including the issue of woman—represent the final category.(Wadud 1999: 3) This dissertation falls under the last category. As I have progressed I have depicted the pitfalls and dangers of interpretations of the first two categories.

In our struggles, women continue to be either marginalized or excluded because Muslim men, including many of those who consider themselves progressive, assume and maintain authority not only based on their interpretation of those sources, but also because the conception of the public domain of an Islamic paradigm is controlled by men. The origins of today’s Muslim women’s movements for greater empowerment and inclusion were heavily influenced by Western theoretical developments on women’s rights and social justice. But this critical ground based on the frenzied accelerated reassertion of patriarchal-based interpretations of the source is also intertwined with authoritative abuses and random selectivity. Muslim women and men began to reappropriate the primary source texts as evidence in support of their ideas and objectives to create indigenous Islamic reforms. But women are still the last ones to use textual reappropriation as a fundamental strategy of empowerment. Now we have come to address the primary sources directly and pushed for greater interpretive inclusion, not only as an act of equality against a history of near-exclusive male authority over texts, but also as a means for better understanding of the self from those sources to fortify both our identity in Islam and the Islamic authenticity of our claims for reform.

In so far as they choose to confine themselves to 'changing Muslim Personal Law from within', rely on the Qur'an for guidance and side with the *ulama*[xxxiii] in their Qur'an for guidance and side with the *ulama* in their rejection of state intervention, they risk having to scale back their aspirations for gender equity under the law. Janaki Nair has a slightly different but related fear. 'It may be too early', she says, 'for feminists to take heart' from the growth of Islamic feminism in India, because blatant challenges to the authority of the *ulama* may have 'the unfortunate consequence of providing a rallying point for a new patriarchal unity', leading to renewed attempts to make women give priority to community solidarity over the pursuit of their own interests as women. (Janaki Nair No Pagination)

A study of Islamic sexuality in the subcontinent remains incomplete without a word on censorship. The idea of censorship is popularly restricted to the discussion of art, film and literature. I want to extend the scope of censorship here. State sponsored censorship emerges from an inherent anxiety—anxiety whether the new mass mediated image or objects bear the potential of disrupting a normative ideal. Popularly, these ‘performative dispensations’(William Mazzarella 191) are understood to be integrated by patron and police functions that are essentially operated by state orders. What slips away from the general theorization is that censorship does not only work in a vertical system, that is, moving from upper to lower stratas, but in a horizontal way too. It can function among people who are socially equal, when no special power or authority is accorded to the perpetrator.

As I proceed towards the end of this thesis, I hear the film *Lipstick under My Burkha* which was banned in India by the censor board a few months ago has been finally cleared for a theatrical release in India. The film by Alankrita Srivastava created a huge consternation because of its explicit portrayal of Muslim women's sexuality. Throughout my dissertation, I have attempted to deal with Muslim women's sexuality and the scope of Islamic feminism on the Indian subcontinent and that would remain incomplete without a word on what artists/authors/scholars have fought against to bring this issue to public forums. *Lipstick under My Burkha* talks about the female gaze. As the trailer shows, women here mould their ways to express their sexual desires in an androcentric society. Even though the film has won accolades in various international film festivals, CBFC banned the film for being 'lady oriented'.

The act of censorship does not restrict itself to the arena of arts or performance but seeps through day-to-day lives. At the hand of neoconservative agencies bound by secular-liberal politics, censorship often comes in the garb of forceful implementation of secularism in its public political sphere. In West Bengal, the then Bengal Left Front government decided to ban Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen's book, *Dwikhandita* ('Split in Two') in 2004. It was feared that the book would incite communal violence. At no point of time has the book been proscribed on political or literary grounds[xxxiv]. In India, Nasreen represents the test of freedom of speech that the Left and Kolkata's intellectual class failed spectacularly in 2007, when she was hounded out of Bengal. *Exile* (Penguin Random House, 2016) the new English translation of the seventh part of her autobiography, recounts that damning tale.

It is difficult, however, to not see Islamophobic political opportunism and personal bitterness in the act of censoring, rather than the alleged fear of communal violence. Bengali Poet Subodh Sarkar asked if Nasreen was "sexually depraved"; author Samaresh Majumdar compared her to Nandarani, a famous prostitute, and said, "She changed her men like women change clothes". The uncharitable comments that have been heaped on her by some of these authors, Ms. Nasreen said: "I have won a number of awards, but the one I treasure the most is the accusation of being a `prostitute' because this means that I have been able to strike hard at the very core of patriarchy which is what I try to oppose through my writings." (The Hindu, Web) She needs one chance to visit West Bengal, which has been steadfastly refusing her entry since 2007. The then Left government, under Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, buckled to the spectre of Muslim fundamentalists running amok, and sent emissaries to pressure her to depart, saying her presence could start a riot. The current Trinamool government too, has made it clear that she is persona non grata. (Indian Express, Web)

I would like to end this dissertation with an anecdote. Pakistani pornstar Nadia Ali was banned for donning the *hijab* while engaging in pornographic acts. It is debatable whether she wears it as a political choice or appropriates it as a prop to fulfil a fetish. She talks about how the traditional Islamic dress has fetched her massive popularity and there are adult entertainment companies that will not shoot her without it. She has asked them to omit 'Muslim' from all the names so that no religious sentiments are hurt but wearing the *hijab* while performing is her way of propagating Muslim women's sexuality and breaking the taboo. In an interview with Refinery she says,

> I am a practising Muslim. Sure I have conflicts between my faith and my day to day life. But doesn't everybody? I started off as a dancer and then I started escorting and doing porn…I grew up in a very strict Islamic community. It was really hard because I always felt that I was always the outcast or that I was the black sheep. I have officially been banned from Pakistan. Pakistan did not ban me because I did porn, they banned me because I wore the scarf and the traditional dress in the adult scenes and performed in Islamic wear…Some people got the message, like 'oh, Nadia Ali doesn't care, bashing her own culture. It wasn't about that. It's me being open with my sexuality. I practise Islam for the sake of peace and guidelines of life. (Refinery29, Web)

This tale appears to me to represent a quick summary of the complex debate that I have been exploring-- Islam, sexuality and its struggles in the nooks and crannies of Indian society. This is the point, perhaps, from where ideology, theology and sexuality can be rewritten from the margins of society. This dissertation looks forward to a complete destruction of any monolithic interpretation of the meaning of Islam, sometime in the future.

Notes and References

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[i] *Bad Feminist : Essays* by Roxane Gay was published in 2014.

[ii] Here I refer to Urdu love poems that are traditionally written with a fixes metrical and rhyme scheme. It is generally mystical in its temperament. The ghazal-form is one of rhymed verse, consisting of couplets whose number could vary with each composition. Each couplet or *shi'r* is complete in form and meaning; often the mood of one *shi'r* in a *ghazal* differs from, or is even opposed to, that of another.

[iii] *Rekhta* is mainstream Urdu poetry with a male or sometimes ungendered speaker. The term *'Rekhti'* springs from this because of female speaker and discussion of female lives in these poems.

[iv] Courtesan

[v] The Respectable class.

[vi] 'The aroused verses'

[vii] C. M Naim in his essay "Transvestic Words?: *Rekhti* in Urdu' talks about the *Rekhti* in light that the verses were produced by men alone and were read by only men. He completely disregards the strong nexus between *Rekhti* poets and courtesans of Lucknow.

[viii] The Hindu counterparts of *tawaifs* are often called by the title *patar*, *patoriva*, *patur*, *paturiya* from the Sanskrit *patra* that means 'an actor'.

[ix] ECR is the abbreviation of 'Enlightenment Critique of Religion'.

[x] Interpretation or exegesis.

[xi] Poem of female- female amours.

[xii] Sex between women.

[xiii] Intimate companion

[xiv] A woman's female lover.

[xv] The act of sex between two women.

[xvi] The part of house especially created for the seclusion of women. *Zanaanah* is a Persian word, derived from the plural, *zanaan* or women. *Zenana* is a word that along with women's apartments also means feminine, an effeminate person or womanly.

[xvii] The Progressive Writers' Association was established in 1935 by Indian writers and intellectuals, with encouragement of some British literary figures. PWA was built on the foundation of the controversial collection of short stories called '*Angaray*' which was published in 1932. The founding members of PWA were Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Ahmed Ali and Mahmuduzzafar. This volume provoked considerable hostility in India and was ultimately banned because of its political radicalism, and obscenity. In his memoirs, Zaheer claims that the leftist writer Ralph Fox was particularly influential in encouraging this radical literary avant-garde movement.

[xviii] The first manifesto of Progressive Writers' Association was adopted in the Foundation Conference of 1936.

[xix] Along with Saadat Hasan Manto, Chughtai was tried for the charge of obscenity in Lihaf. She was lambasted by critics, including some on the left, for what was seen as her preoccupation with

sexuality, a charge that she shrugged off as untrue and irrelevant.

[xx] Deepa Mehta's Fire released in 1996 that became a centre of controversy nation because of its depiction lesbian relationship between two daughters-in-law of an Indian family.

[xxi]Bildungsroman (German pronunciation) is a genre of novel that depicts one's formative years. This literary genre focuses on the protagonist's moral or spiritual groeth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood.

[xxii] *Lihaf* created a lot of heat and dust and Chughtai was taken to the court at Lahore on charges of obscenity. At Lahore she had occasion to spend a good deal of time with Manto who supported her fiercely and who was himself being similarly tried for his story, *Thanda Gosht*. At the end of a two year trial Chughtai was acquitted of the charge. According to her own account the narrative was based on the actual lifestory of the wife of Nawab Swalekhan of Aligarh who was a homosexual.

[xxiii] *Sukun* can also be translated as love. But it is popularly related to the fulfilment of a sexual relationship when seen outside its procreative role.

[xxiv] By this, I refer to the four coordinated attacks by Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeeda on United States in 2001 that killed almost three thousand people. I will be referring to this event by its date '9/11'.

[xxv] 1971 saw the war of independence in Bangladesh. Before 1971 it used to be known as East Pakistan.

[xxvi] Oghi is a small village that is close to the Taliban belt, in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. NWFP was renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2010.

[xxvii] Veil to cover face while travelling.

[xxviii] Laila is the speaker in the section called ‘Eid in Oghi’. Nighat Gandhi marvels how she has blended compromise and resistance in her politics. She is in love with a man but does not know how to stay at his house that does not have her sense of aesthetics or freedom.

[xxix] Nighat Gandhi narrates the life story of Qurtulain in the section called *‘Siraat-e-Mustaqeem*- The Straight path’. She is introduced as Nusrat’s partner and then reveals her own life. She was married for some time and had a son. She mentions the dissatisfaction she felt in the sexual relationship with her husband and how sex with Nusrat was a revelation to her.

[xxx] Firdaus the narrator from the section called ‘Love is a spiritual Experience’. As she battled her way through her philandering husbands, she found her true worth. She began writing and painting. Gandhi puts excerpts from her widely accolade and controversial short story ‘Gaaey’(The Cow) which depicts her journey and her lasting relationship with spirituality.

[xxxi] Nighat pens down Ghazala’s narrative in the section called ‘Dilli se Lahore’. Even though she is married a man, she does not want to live with him. She prefers her independence over any love.

[xxxii] Hafiz Junaid and his four brothers had gone to Delhi's Sadar Bazar to shop for Eid. They boarded a train from Sadar Bazar and got into a fight over seats with some men who called them "beef-eaters" and "anti-nationals". After two hours of violence on the train that night, Hashim was allowed to get off at Asota with Hafiz Junaid's body and his two brothers, who too were badly injured. (Bharadwaj, Ananya. "His dying image will haunt me forever: Brother of Muslim boy lynched on train". Hindustan Times. June 27, 2017. Web < http://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/his-dying-image-will-haunt-me-forever-says-brother-of-youth-lynched-on-train/story-rucxr5FjxSr3vvoXPrBSdL.html>)

[xxxiii] Arabic term *Ulama* means 'The Learned one' or 'Scholar'. In this case, it refers to someone who is well-versed in Islamic religious scriptures and its mainstream interpretation.

[xxxiv] In a government notification issued on November 28, the state LF government formally invoked the ban on *Dwikhondita* under section 95 of the code of Criminal Procedure, read with Act 153 of the Indian Penal Code (where it is considered a criminal and punishable act to create enmity, rivalry, and hatred amongst religious communities).

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