In a recent talk given at a North American University, a prominent feminist scholar from the United States observed that the contributions of Black women in mass political movements have been given short shrift in both conventional male-centred narratives of revolutionary movements (such as the Black Power movement in the USA), and mainstream feminist accounts of women’s activism, because interventions by Black women do not always conform to the usual definitions of either revolutionary or feminist action. Drawing her examples from protests launched by Black working-class women – especially mothers – against Pass Laws, and restricted access to housing and educational opportunities in mid-1950s South Africa, the speaker commented that feminists, especially those of colour, need to ‘see feminism in the most unlikely places’. She further stressed that feminists need to ‘acknowledge’ instances of ‘indigenous feminist action’, which remain mostly undocumented or unknown otherwise.

While I share this concern over the limitations of dominant representations in principle, the speaker’s comments regarding the need to look for feminism in ‘unlikely’ places, as well as questions that followed from the predominantly North American audience (such as ‘how do we know it is feminism when we see it’, again, presumably in such ‘unlikely’ contexts as the working-class struggle against apartheid in South Africa), threw up a set of questions that resonate with my current preoccupations with the problems of writing histories of difference in general, and feminist history in particular. What, for instance, is the definition of ‘feminism’ being deployed here as apparently transparent, but in fact remains remarkably unspecified in such usage? Who or what determines what ‘unlikely’ and, by logical extension, ‘likely’ contexts for ‘feminist’ politics might be? Does resistance by women to any (or multiple) form(s) of oppression and injustice – regardless of its myriad sites and modalities of enunciation – necessarily have to be baptised ‘feminist’ in order for it to be appreciated, indeed visible, within academic
discourses? In what terms, then, are we to understand/apprehend acts of resistance by women that do not readily lend themselves to such a billing? And last, while I understand how feminist history is enriched through anachronistic inclusions of revolutionary actions initiated by women anywhere within its folds, I am not convinced that histories of such struggles have necessarily something to gain from recognition/acknowledgement by feminists fifty or one hundred years later. In my reading, such claims to the abilities/rights of feminists living and working in ‘the West’—regardless of their national/ethnic/racial positioning—to validate acts of resistance undertaken elsewhere, thus, seem to echo an old misunderstanding that has proved to be remarkably obdurate within Western modernisationist/liberal thinking regarding the direction of flow of value—in terms of both ideas and material goods—in the capitalist world system. I raise this issue not to be contrary for the sake of it, but because it would seem that the intellectual politics implicit in such uses of language, no matter how unconscious, is not entirely divorced from larger formations of power—geopolitical, social, economic or otherwise.

While these questions are clearly at the heart of the politics of knowledge production in the West, especially in its use and appropriation of histories of peoples and places outside the margins of its self-imagining, this paper grapples with a slightly different, albeit related, problem in the light of the questions I raise above. Here, I want to focus on ways in which metropolitan intellectual politics in influences knowledge production within third-world or anti-imperial locations—defined geographically or otherwise—about subjects from or in the third world, which have been ignored by one or more form(s) of normative historical narratives. Specifically, I will examine certain tendencies within a growing body of research on Muslim women in colonial India—a subject category that, until recently, has received relatively little attention within mainstream, and even feminist, historiography of India. Through this discussion, I will reflect on ways in which a particular notion of feminism, as a metanarrative of emergence and progress towards an apparently known end, operates to inform and shape this historiography and its underlying structure of desires, best exemplified in the recurring metaphors of visibility and voice, in specific, if unintended ways.

I take my cue here from Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who insists that her critique of the ‘analytical strategies’ of ‘Western feminist’ discourse, which produce ‘the West’ as the ‘implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others’, also applies to ‘third world scholars writing about their own cultures’. It seems that while criticising the ‘ethnocentric universalism’ or ‘sanctioned ignorances’ in the work of scholars from the geographic West has become something of a commonplace in postcolonial scholarship, the strategies used by
postcolonial/third-world writers themselves in their attempt to rewrite history remain relatively unscrutinised. Mary E. John expresses a similar discomfort regarding the lack of reflection on the kinds of ‘co-constructed narratives’ used at times by Indian feminists to retrieve their histories, about what ‘becomes sayable at particular historical conjunctures’ and within what ‘institutions and practices’. As Mohanty and John see it, the task of formulating an explicitly situated postcolonial feminist intellectual agenda does not stop with simply critiquing ‘sanctioned ignorances amongst Western intellectuals’; it also necessarily involves an ongoing examination of the ‘enabling constraints’ produced by postcolonial scholars’ own locations within – or vis à vis – the West.

This paper is a product of precisely such ongoing reflection on the choice of narrative strategies and categories available to postcolonial/third-world scholars as they attempt to produce histories of peoples from the third world, often for the Western academy. The main purpose here is to offer a critical reading of certain unacknowledged conventions within such scholarship that, in my view, undercut its stated commitment to exploring diverse histories. The paper in this sense is no more than an exercise in space-clearing – or what Martina Kessel calls a ‘think piece’ – which presents not a fully developed alternative argument, but a set of reflections that need further elaboration, but which are nonetheless useful in their current form in mapping, or perhaps re-defining, the contours of an ongoing debate within both feminist and postcolonial scholarship, often in tandem. What follows, therefore, is both a critical engagement with a specific body of literature – on Muslim women in colonial India – and an attempt to think through some of the problems of writing histories of difference in and around the cracks of normative teleologies of the modern.

I should also clarify that I do not aspire to present an exhaustive review of the existing literature on Muslim women in the Indian subcontinent here. My concern is restricted mostly to scholarship on Muslim women in colonial India – a rather understudied area within Indian historiography. The empirical focus of the paper is further narrowed to a few recently published, influential works in this area that make explicit use of the idea of ‘feminism’. Metaphors of change and ‘emancipation of women’, however, are certainly not the sole preserve of the texts cited below. The broader implications of the arguments presented here, therefore, may well be relevant to feminist histories written in other contexts.

**Burden of proof**

In recent decades, feminist scholarship in the West has been subjected to much criticism for its continued, if unacknowledged, adherence to its
liberal roots, especially its investment in preserving the coherence of ‘woman’ as a category which, like the liberal ‘individual’, hides its specific ethno-class composition behind a language of universalism. As critical interventions led by black, third-world and/or lesbian feminists have rightly pointed out, insistence on a universal category such as ‘woman’, based on a single axis of identification/signification, occludes the simultaneous workings of other axes such as race, class or sexuality (to name a few), that necessarily inflect one’s experience of gender oppression or privilege. Given these homogenising tendencies stemming from a liberalism that Ann Snitow describes as ‘an essential thread’ running through ‘Anglo-American feminism’ – albeit increasingly acknowledged – it is perhaps not surprising that feminist scholars interested in writing histories of difference have taken up the task of making experiences of previously marginalised women visible as an important counter-strategy. The recent burgeoning of historical research on Muslim women in colonial India can be read as part of a similar move to counter both the overwhelming visibility of Hindu middle-class women, and the near invisibility of Muslim women, or their persistent representation as ‘backward’, within normative historical accounts. However, to the extent that this ‘writing back’ is reactive and moored to a project of recovery, it is often beset by some typical problems.

For one, much of this research simply takes categories of difference, such as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Hindu’, for granted, without attempting a relational reading of how such difference is constructed in the first place, and to what end. Consequently, the descriptive labels that mark different women also often end up naturalising these differences. More importantly, as Joan W. Scott has argued for women’s history in general, the ‘herstory’ mode of rewriting history, which characterises much of this literature, tries to simply ‘fit a new [or previously ignored] subject – [in this case, Muslim] women – into received categories, [such as modern, or liberal, or feminist] interpreting their actions in terms recognizable . . .’ within the dominant historiographic tradition in question. The effect, I would argue, is precisely to flatten the very difference that apparently mandated this ‘new’ history in the first place, and produce Muslim women as ‘just like’, or rather ‘almost like’, the fabled subject positions ‘liberal’ or ‘feminist’. As a result, what might have been a rich and complex history of negotiation and resistance is reduced to yet another tired exercise in the service of producing sameness.

In much of the scholarship on Muslim women in colonial India, the overwhelming purpose of the arguments seems to be to prove that they (Muslim women) underwent a set of changes – variously described as ‘enlightenment’, ‘awakening’ or ‘modernisation’, and defined in terms of a familiar infusion of Westernised practices in institutions such as
education, seclusion and family – that modernising women everywhere are supposed to go through on the fast track of Progress. For instance, in the introduction to her recent book on Indian Muslim women, Azra Asghar Ali describes the main goals of the text as tracing the ‘chain of developments that gradually opened up a space for Muslim women’ in the decades before independence, and in turn facilitated the ‘emergence of feminism’ among them.\textsuperscript{27} Once formulated in these terms, the task in much of the book is then reduced to simply recording the familiar ‘transformations’, defined almost always as an increased presence of Muslim women – in specific institutions of education, health care, social and political legislature and literary culture – which contributed to their presumed arrival at or ‘evolution’ into, as the author would have it, an already determined end – feminism/feminist consciousness or subjecthood.\textsuperscript{28}

In another important recent work on Muslim women in colonial Bengal, Sonia Amin discusses the applicability of terms such as \textit{bhadralok} (gentleman) and \textit{bhadramahila} (gentlewoman), which were born in the context of rapid modernisation among a Hindu middle-class in the nineteenth century, to the men and women of the newly emerging Muslim middle-class in the early twentieth century:

\begin{quote}
If we place the Zobedas and the Rabeyas and the Monwaras\textsuperscript{29} of 1920 alongside the Ashalatas and Swarnaalatas and the Anupamas,\textsuperscript{30} we see the close resemblance. At first glance one would not be able to tell them apart. They looked the same, spoke the same language, wore the same sari and chemise, inhabited the same geographical space, and shared many vital concerns such as husband, home, children etc. It is only on a closer scrutiny that the differences would emerge—in religious belief and ritual life, in notions of a past heritage and mythology, and in political stands.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

It is curious that neither Amin’s book nor her two articles\textsuperscript{32} dedicated more explicitly to the problem of appropriate nomenclature, give the readers an adequate sense of why the applicability of these terms merits so much attention. Surely, the Muslim middle-class was free to refer to itself by whatever name it chose? And if not, should that not be a part of this discussion on nomenclature? In an earlier article, Amin makes the barest of gestures towards the source of the problem when she writes:

\begin{quote}
A scrutiny of contemporary literature reveals that the non-Muslim community, Hindu and \textit{Brahmo} in the main, did not refer to their Muslim counterpart as \textit{bhadralok}, the term being apparently reserved for their own kind.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

So a discussion of the politics underlying the marking of difference through the use (or withholding) of terms such as \textit{bhadralok} and \textit{bhadramahila} inheres in Amin’s work, but she does not address it. Instead, her work seems preoccupied with simply proving that Muslim experiences
of ‘reforms’ at the turn of the nineteenth century were akin to those undertaken by Hindus and Brahmos half a century earlier, as if these processes were discrete, unrelated occurrences that could be treated as separate moments in a narrative of linear progress towards modernity. Differences, in this discussion, appear as somehow essential, belonging to something of an inner world, beyond the reach of immediate vision, that apparently need no explanation as products of specific lived histories and politics, even though conceptions of difference around such naturalised ‘notions of past heritage and mythology’ have resulted in periodic eruptions of violence everywhere in the subcontinent – involving the deaths and displacement of millions – throughout its career in modernity, both in its colonial and post-colonial moments.

**Feminist grounds**

Another striking feature of the literature on Muslim women is its frequent use of and relationship to the idea of ‘feminism’. On closer scrutiny, what emerges is something of a paradox: an automatic invocation, on one hand, of the terms feminism/feminist in discussions of the life and works of Muslim women in late colonial India, and a simultaneous uncertainty in using them. Consequently, many of the texts seem to be quite preoccupied with proving their subjects as adequately feminist. Take, for example, the following passage, in which Amin considers similarities between British and Bengali women, only to follow swiftly with an apologetic disclaimer:

> [Were] Bengali women experiencing a similar construction of the private and public and erosion of its distance, as Victorian/Edwardian women? … A cogent, apparent, and historically concrete ground for comparability of Victorian/Edwardian and colonial Bengali women was the phenomenon of ‘First Wave Feminism’ … It is in the [large, multifaceted] nature and the objective of this feminist movement that the linkages between the British and Bengali—Brahmo and Muslim—models are discernible. At the same time it must be pointed out that this is only an analogy … valid only from a distance far enough to blur incongruencies.

The author seems to be quite clear here that ‘First Wave Feminism’ provides the ‘ground’ – perhaps the only one – for comparing subjects who are sufficiently different from each other to warrant such comparisons otherwise. Note also her invocation of terms such as ‘cogent’ and ‘apparent’, which establish ‘feminism’ as a standard beyond question, whose meanings are both transparent and shared across temporal and spatial contexts.

Now it may well be that the particular women in question are in fact feminists, according to standards established in the West. Or it may be that they do not qualify as such. My problem, however, stems from my
inability, or perhaps refusal, to see the usefulness of such comparisons, which routinely hijack attempts to understand/appreciate Muslim women’s works in the teeth of intense opposition in colonial India on their own terms, shifting our focus in the process to a discussion of how Muslim women fared in a race to an already determined feminist finishing line. What I object to, in other words, is the way in which feminism figures in these discussions as the epistemic ground that defines, indeed monopolises, the very terms within which we are obliged to pose questions of women’s agency in any context. In my reading, this preoccupation with ‘feminism’, as an adequate measure of women’s agency everywhere, signals the continued importance of the old modernisationist notion that all impetus for change or ‘progress’, including those affecting women, originate in the West and then get imported elsewhere in an entirely unidirectional traffic of ideas. The picture, of course, is considerably more complicated. As Anisuzzaman, in writing about women’s emancipation in late colonial Bengal, poignantly reminds us,

Many [scholars] have assumed that the [19th century] Bengal renaissance was inspired entirely by the infusion of western ideas. But in reality, it is difficult to trace the path to self-definition of a colonized society.

Or as Roushan Jahan argues in her introduction to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream*, ‘feminist sentiments [can] grow from indigenous roots, without depending on foreign influence’ – a point that we will revisit presently.

I am also troubled by what seems to be a wholesale acceptance of post-enlightenment notions of visibility and voice in the public sphere as the only legitimate markers of subject-hood, and the automatic equation of such visibility/voice with a feminist subject position in many of these accounts. For instance, in her book, *The Emergence of Feminism*, Azra Asghar Ali seems to conflate uncritically feminist consciousness with women’s public appearance or participation in mass political movements. For those of us on the VHP/BJP (two arms of the powerful Hindu Right based in India) watch, it is of course increasingly difficult to automatically celebrate the presence of vocal and visible women in mass political movements. But my objection to Ali’s deployment of feminism as a politics of only rights-bearing subject-hood turns on the way in which such analytical conflations foreclose upon the possibility of appreciating other, perhaps more collective, forms of agency and resistance that women have historically deployed within the ‘private’, and hence less visible, sphere to cope with gender oppression.

We are all familiar with stories of women braving social ostracism in their fight against seclusion and *purdah* that constitute a staple of feminist accounts of women in colonial India. However, accounts of
resistance by women who did not wish to pander to their liberal husbands’ desire for appropriately ‘modern’ consorts seem to get routinely glossed over, as so much inconvenient detail that unnecessarily complicates the story of modernity as the ‘normalized telos of a developmental process’, even in its embattled feminist version. Such elisions point, I think, to the continued purchase of feminism’s foundational liberal premises in the praxis of feminist intellectual politics, even if we think we have tackled the beast in theory.

Out of place, out of time: the problem of coevalness

In the concluding chapter of her book on Muslim women in colonial Bengal, Sonia Amin wisely cautions against making hasty comparisons between Bengali Hindu, Muslim and British women. As she writes:

> In respect of the time frame alone, for instance, the three categories of women stand apart—British women started experiencing modernization from the early nineteenth century, *Brahmo* women from the middle of the century and the Muslim women from the first decades of the twentieth century.

Amin is of course confident that notwithstanding the many ‘diverse cultural and material differences’, by the 1940s

> … a *Brahmo bhadramahila*, a Muslim *bhadramahila* and an English lady … would have much ultimately to say to each other—much in terms of territory gained or lost in their struggle for ‘emancipation’ … [The] modern, urban dwelling, middle-class Muslim *bhadramahila* had emerged.

In other words, in spite of their different starting points on this path towards ‘emancipation’ (/feminism), by the mid-nineteenth century, Bengali women – even Bengali Muslim women – had in fact caught up with British women. What, then, is the difficulty in comparing them? The answer, it would seem, lies in the problem of time. Or to be more precise, in the perception that British, *Brahmo* and Muslim women achieve ‘emancipation’, defined presumably by their arrival or emergence in the field of public vision, at different times.

One could of course argue that the so-called ‘modernisation’ of British women in the early nineteenth century and the ‘lack’ of it among women in parts of the world colonised by Britain might just have something to do with each other. Any discussion of developments – economic, political or social – in either of these locations should therefore take into account the relational nature of these processes, especially since the particular definition of ‘emancipation’ being deployed here turns so heavily on the trope of visibility/voice in a ‘public’ sphere that is defined by the condition of colonial domination.

The problem, I believe, stems from the practice of evaluating experiences that are spawned by very different social and cultural contexts, in terms of a single measure of achievement derived from a specific set of historical contingencies – European/metropolitan imperial experiences – but touted as a transhistorical universal goal/standard to be emulated everywhere. One consequence of fetishising a particular set of experiences as ‘progress’ is to interpret all difference in terms of ‘distance’ (temporal, as in ‘lagging behind’, and/or substantive, as in ‘different/deviating’) from that ideal and apparently common end, forcing them in the process into a hierarchy, rather than to consider them laterally, in their full measure of complexity and richness. A second consequence, as we have seen before, is to oversimplify or even ignore altogether those experiences that do not lend themselves easily to this scheme of actualisation/failure of the normalised telos. The problem of ‘time’ that Amin runs into in the quote above is thus clearly an instance of what Johannes Fabian has called the denial of coevalness – a consequence of ordering social and cultural differences that exist in a common temporal present into a hierarchical sequence of historical epochs or evolutionary stages. Difference, in such formulations, is understood as points on a vertical scale of inferiority/superiority, presence/lack or advancement/backwardness, rather than on a horizontal field of plurality in which no point has definitional advantage over the others.

The final problem I want to raise here also has to do with the problem of time, but it brings us back more specifically to the unpleasant business of ‘unlikely’ contexts for feminist action. It is not uncommon to find within this literature particular Muslim women being presented as exceptional, in the sense of ‘ahead of their time,’ and often even ‘out of place’. This particular formulation is most apparent in discussions of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein and the formidable legacy of her work. Scholars are frequently moved to try to locate the roots of her critical thinking in a context other than the zenana in late colonial Bengal. Consider the following quotes from an article by Sonita Sarker, in which she attempts to place...

... this particular Bengali woman’s engagement with modernity in a milieu larger than Bengal so as to emphasize that her membership lies also in a greater community of thinkers, namely in the company of women intellectuals in other parts of the world ... women who address the roles of technology and its rationality in describing the new woman who can own the property of reason.

And later, Sarker comments on Rokeya’s now famous piece Sultana’s Dream (1905):(...

In conceiving [the world of Sultana], Hossein should be seen as a contemporary of the feminist writers of utopias ... such as the North American Charlotte Perkins Gilman (in Herland, published in 1915) and the Britisher Virginia Woolf (in Three Guineas, published in 1938) who also placed Women in direct relationship to science.
I draw our attention to these quotes to highlight in what terms these and other similar attempts at establishing Rokeya as exceptional, construct the temporal and spatial contexts that she did inhabit. For if we are to accept Sarker’s description of Rokeya as a ‘new woman who can own the property of reason’, or concur with Sonia Amin’s indictment of the zenana only as ‘the repository of weakness, ignorance and temptation’, then we in fact ignore a history of courage and grit, of a long line of women (and men) who were engaged in the work of cultural and political resistance and reform for over half a century before Rokeya was born. So why should it be so hard to imagine that her criticality could have been fostered within the material and discursive contexts of her life – albeit in specific, situated, perhaps even limited ways? Why must we trace the genealogy of Rokeya’s critical consciousness to a community of intellectual women who were publishing ten to forty years after Sultana’s Dream was published – in English – but by all accounts never as much as acknowledged her work, when her own world was full of women and men with fortitude and resourcefulness?

Unless, of course, our theoretical language is still moored to the binary thinking of colonial/imperial discourse – a discourse that needs the ‘zenana as the cavernous depths of idolatry and superstition’ trope to secure daily its own sense of liberal (or liberated) self. This is the irony: the zenana did change. The veil has come to embody a wide variety of complex meanings in Muslim societies all over the world, including its creative deployment in anti-imperialist struggles. But the privileged position(s) accorded to the zenana and the veil as quintessential sites of medieval depravity remains remarkably unchanged within liberal feminist discourse. Consequently, although the variety of meanings women give to life in zenanas interrupt this economy of transparent meanings often enough, they are recuperated (or made visible) within the enlightened folds of feminist accounts only as exceptions – as instances of feminist consciousness out of time/place. We are back, in other words, in the murky business of hunting for gold in ‘unlikely’ contexts to fill the coffers of feminism, re-instating in the process the zenana, and it would seem Muslim (/third world) womanhood itself, to the oppression and victim-hood they are routinely associated with within Western feminist discourse, produced in the geographic West or elsewhere.

Notes
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2. Kuumba used the term ‘unsupported’ in this context. I have used the words ‘undocumented’ and ‘unknown’ in my attempt to paraphrase what I understood to be the general thrust of her statement.


4. Mary E. John has recently defined ‘the West’ as not so much ‘a geographical or temporal entity’ but a ‘social, economic, cultural,’ and as Ashis Nandy would have it, ‘psychological space’. In her words, it is ‘a transnational category, capable of extending geographical determinations and creating new and specific loci of power/knowledge through the manifold processes of Westernization’. Mary E. John, *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 8–9. See also Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). I use ‘the West’ as a conceptual space that is neither restricted to the geographies with which the term is conventionally associated, nor necessarily representative of all intellectual/political/cultural/social spaces within such geographical boundaries. I am indebted also to Dipesh Chakrabarty for his specific use of the idea of ‘Europe’ from which I derive my own understanding of the ‘West’. In his recent book Chakrabarty writes, ‘“Europe” and “India” are treated here as hyperreal terms in that they refer to certain figures of imagination whose geographic referents remain somewhat indeterminate…’ I realize that…Liberal-minded scholars would immediately protest that any idea of a homogenous, uncontested “Europe” dissolves under analysis. True, but just as the phenomenon of Orientalism does not disappear simply because some of us have now attained critical awareness of it, similarly a certain version of “Europe,” reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern, continues to dominate the discourse of history. Analysis does not make it go away’. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 27–8.


7. The Euro-American academy is perhaps the most obvious locus of such knowledge production and deployment, but it is by no means the only one.


17. For discussions of Muslim women in contemporary India, see K. N. Jehangir, Muslim Women in West Bengal (Calcutta: Minerva, 1991); Mohini Anjum (ed.), Muslim Women in India (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1992); M. Indu Menon, Status of Muslim women in India: A Case Study of Kerala (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1981); Patricia Jeffery, Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah (London: Zed Press, 1979). While individual studies vary in terms of both substantive focus and tone, the works cited above are largely involved in explaining Muslim women’s perceived ‘backwardness’, often in terms of certain taken-for-granted indices of modernisation – such as formal education, participation in the public political rites of the nation-state etc. – in contemporary India. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find in studies of Muslim women, statements such as the following: ‘Traditionally, Muslim women are subordinated to men and secluded from the outside world.


27. Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism Among Indian Muslim Women, 1920–1947* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. xvii. In the Preface to her recent book on Punjabi Muslim women, Dushka S. Saiyid also invokes a similar formulation when she writes, ‘The study is organized according to the apparent sequence of events in the slow but steady emancipation of Punjabi Muslim women from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the time of independence. The legal system that the Muslim women were placed in, western education which created an intellectual climate critical of purdah, along with the public participation of Muslim women in politics, brought many of them out of seclusion’. Dushka Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab: From Seclusion to Politics* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. xiv.


29. Muslim names.

30. Hindu names.


35. Curiously, while earlier commentaries by authors such as Roushan Jahan, or Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha simply describe Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein as feminist, authors in later works seem burdened with the need to substantiate their claim. Roushan Jahan, ‘Introduction’ to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein’s *Sultana’s Dream and Selections from The Secluded Ones* (New York: CUNY, The Feminist Press, 1988); Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing In India, 600 B.C. to the Present, vol. I* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).


42. David Scott, Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality (Princeton University Press, 1999).


45. I am thinking here of the works of a whole line of scholars, starting with the United Nations’ Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), dependency, and world-systems schools, to those that fall roughly under the rubrics of empire/postcolonial studies.

46. I thank Böröcz József for sharpening my understanding of this point.


48. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein lived and worked in Bengal between 1880 and 1932. Apart from being a prolific writer, Rokeya is also remembered for her efforts to bring formal education to women in seclusion by starting a school for Muslim girls that helped them maintain purdah but still get formal education. In their introduction to Rokeya’s work, Tharu and Lalitha describe her as a ‘courageous feminist writer and activist who worked all her life to remove what she called the ‘purdah of ignorance’ .’ Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, Women Writing In India, 600 B.C. to the Present, vol. I (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 340.

49. Separate quarters for women. Also known as andarmahal (literally inner quarters) in Bengal.


51. Sultana’s Dream has been billed as a feminist fantasy. See Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, Women Writing In India, 600 B.C. to the Present, vol. I (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).


53. Sonia Nishat Amin, ‘Childhood and Role Models in the Andar Mahal: Muslim women in the private sphere in colonial Bengal,’ in K. Jayawardena and Mulathi De Alwis (eds), Embodied Violence: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia (London: Zed Books, 1996), p. 71. It is important to note that contrary to common assumptions, life in the zenanas was not always uniformly oppressive for all women, everywhere. See Brajendranath Bandopadhay, Mogul Juge Stri Shiksha (Calcutta: Manashi Press, 1919), pp. 1–3.

54. For discussions of women’s work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik (eds), Zena Mehfil: Bangali Musalmans

55. See Janaki Nair, ‘Uncovering the Zenana: Visions of Indian Womanhood in English-women’s Writings, 1813–1940’, *Journal of Women’s History* 2 (1990), pp. 8–34, for an incisive analysis of the place of the *zenana* in colonial discourse.