

Processes That Rendered Muslim Women Invisible

ROCHONA MAJUMDAR

In their 2004 book entitled *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon remarked on the irony of the fact that while there is no dearth of interest in “Muslim women” in post-colonial India, most studies are so mired in certain preconceived notions about that community as to render their subjects “invisible”.¹ Most scholarly endeavours, they argue, are either focused overwhelmingly on the workings of Muslim personal law and its impact on women, or fail to recognise that the category Muslim woman is not monolithic. Mahua Sarkar’s *Visible Histories Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* takes the charge levelled by Hasan and Menon seriously as it attempts to analyse the processes by which Muslim women “disappeared” from colonial and nationalist discourse in India. “Disappearance” refers to the processes by which, despite their being active in the colonial public sphere in different ways, Muslim women are rendered by colonial and nationalist prose into static stereotypes of a backward, depraved, minority community or are ignored altogether. There is no historical acknowledgement of the diversity characteristic of the lives of these women. The actual, lived presence of these women becomes invisible. Sarkar takes Bengali Muslim women during the turn of the 20th century as a case to study this process of disappearance.

Her project in this work is to first delineate the “discursive mechanisms” at work in “contexts of large-scale social change” that created the stereotype of the Bengali Muslim woman.² This was a figure of backwardness, lack, and abjectness. Second, Sarkar queries the impact of such “invisibility/victim image” on the understandings of a normative, post-colonial, Indian citizen-subject. The third purpose of the book is to map the ways in which Muslim

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Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal by Mahua Sarkar (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008; pp 352, \$ 23.95 (paperback).

women – through both acceptance and rejection – responded to these stereotypes. And finally, she offers some reflections “on the ways in which taking Muslim women and their work into account affects how the past is thought of and written about in post-colonial India”.³

‘Writing Difference’

The aforementioned factors are explored in the four chapters of *Visible Histories*. In addition, the book offers a critical Introduction, “Writing Difference”, and a thoughtful conclusion. In the Introduction, Sarkar notes that from the third quarter of the 19th century, a small but highly articulate Bengali Muslim intelligentsia – comprising both men and a few women – was making its presence felt in the public sphere. This presence broadened by the first quarter of the 20th century to include a substantial number of female Muslim writers who contributed regularly to a burgeoning world of Muslim literary production. Interestingly, many of these women also contributed to periodicals run by Hindus. It is surprising therefore that there is hardly a mention of the works and achievements of these Muslim women in Indian nationalist or post-colonial historiography, with the exception of one or two particularly celebrated authors like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein and Sufia Kamal. “The recorded history of women in pre-partition Bengal”, argues Sarkar, “continues to be overwhelmingly a narrative of reformist experiments of a small minority of Hindu/Brahmo women, who actively participated

in the modernising projects of the new ‘liberal’ elite.”⁴ The same tendency, she notes, marks the works by feminist historians, some of whom have actually reasoned their choice by noting that Muslim women deserve “a separate study” (Meredith Borthwick) or that “the Muslim gender system differed significantly from the Hindu” (Dagmar Engels).⁵ These stances bespeak for Sarkar an “assumption...that Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent have separate histories that can be, indeed need to be, recorded as discrete, largely self-referential accounts.”⁶

Sarkar’s effort to see Hindu and Muslim histories in Bengal as intricately linked is indeed laudable and her critique of much existing historiography being focused on Hindu women is true. Nonetheless, works by scholars like Tanika Sarkar, Mrinalini Sinha, Sonia Nishat Amin, to name just a few notable examples, demonstrate that even if the explicit archival focus of these studies has been on one of the communities in question, they also seriously factor in the presence of the other community in drawing their conclusions about the development of Hindu or Muslim identities.⁷ That said, however, Mahua Sarkar’s project of “materialising a series of discursive sites or contexts” where Bengali Muslim women “appear and disappear in particular ways” marks indeed a welcome and important intervention in post-colonial Indian historiography.⁸

Making Invisible

The first chapter of the book, “Colonial Casts” offers an argument about disappearance of women, and Muslim women in particular, as a general feature of colonial histories. Drawing upon some colonial accounts, the works of historians, popular writers in Bengali like Sripantha, scholarship on other imperial sites by scholars like Ann Stoler, and art historical readings of company era paintings by Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Ratnabali Chattopadhyay, Sarkar discusses how colonial companionships between Englishmen and native women in late 18th century India provide us with examples of her thesis of “disappearance”. These relationships, as we know from works by Ghosh, Dalrymple,

and I Chatterjee, ranged from marriage, concubinage, to forms of household slavery. Yet, archival records often neglect to mention these native female companions by their proper names. The first task facing the historian is often that of reconstructing, painstakingly, the history of colonial relationships from other archival traces – wills, birth, baptism, and death records, and visual evidence such as paintings, letters, and so on.

Sarkar reads the aforementioned research to draw out a continuum between the late 18th century elision of women's presence in colonial accounts and the rendering invisible of Bengali Muslim women from late-colonial, nationalist, and post-colonial narratives. Her project therefore is not so much about the retrieval of historical record. She writes,

the marginalisation, if not disappearance, of colonial companions – many of whom were Muslim and hence of particular interest to the current project – within the existing historiography of colonial India should not be treated as an oversight that simply awaits correction but as symptomatic of a tendency to present sexual relationships as epiphenomenal to (colonial) history, ... that systematically devalues the sexual and domestic labour of native women and the significance of these relationships as constitutive of the social fabric of colonial India.⁹

To the extent that Europeans spoke at all about Indian women in the 18th century they were depicted as "housekeepers, servants, companions, ...common law wives, or bibis". The 19th century witnessed a transformation in colonial modes of acknowledgement of the presence of native women in their private lives. These later day accounts talked about Indian women as victimised or debased by the barbarity of a masculinist, Indian culture. This shift was necessitated in order to justify the paternalist role of the colonial state.

These insights lead to the second chapter where Sarkar discusses how the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia appropriated certain features of colonial descriptions about the Indian people and rejected others. While Bengali Hindu men and women internalised colonial stereotypes about Muslims as depraved, foreign, backward, and debased, they ignored depictions of Hindu women by the English as sensuous and seductive. Through an analysis of articles

from Bengali periodicals and newspapers, Sarkar demonstrates how the Indian (Hindu) woman as an epitome of chastity, maternal love, and purity came to be foregrounded by male and female Hindu/Brahmo writers spurred by nationalist impulses. This vision provided the normative ideal of the future Indian citizen subject. It privileged an essentially Hindu male projection of an ideal type onto Hindu women while marginalising the figure of (even the literate) Muslim woman.

Countering these representations, chapter three entitled "Negotiating Modernity" offers an overview of writings by middle class Muslim men and women which appeared in journals run by Muslim editors such as *Saogat*, *Naoroz*, *Shikha*, *Al-Eslam*, *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* as well as in some run by Hindus, such as *Bambodhini Patrika*, *Mahila*, and *Antahpur*. These writings display a multiplicity of views about Muslim identity in early 20th century Bengal that according to Sarkar "rarely enter into normative historical accounts of colonial Bengal produced in post-independence India, which privilege the story of the Partition and hence, implicitly reinforce popular notions of the Muslim as "separatist" and "conservative".¹⁰ It is not entirely clear to me which post-independence historians Sarkar is referencing here. But in light of books such as *Bengal Divided* (1994), or *Carving Blocs* (1999) to take two examples from the 1990s (both of which she cites in different contexts), it would appear that Sarkar is painting all critical academic production with the same brush.¹¹ While Sarkar's originality lies in focusing attention on Muslim women, it would be inaccurate to argue that there are no critical historical works in post-independence India, or Bengal that analyse the pernicious impact of Hindu communalism and critically query colonial or nationalist accounts that portray Muslims as demonic.

Rendered Marginal

In the last chapter, "Difference in Memory," Sarkar examines carefully – and in much depth – oral testimonies she collected over interviews with eight Muslim and seven Hindu women. This probably is the book's most powerful section. Her analysis of these conversations demonstrates her

self-reflexivity as a sociologist, and her close and attentive reading of women's narratives in an effort to draw out the implications of that which remained unspoken or was rapidly glossed over is laudable. Notable particularly is Sarkar's account of a minor but charged difference of opinion that occurred when Jahan Ara (b 1939) invited Sarkar and several of her Hindu female friends over to her house in Park Circus. Likewise, her reading of the ways in which Jahan Ara, Nusrat Begum, or Mumtaz Waheeda spoke about their memories of being Muslim in pre- and post-Partition Calcutta and Dhaka, respectively, bring out the extreme disappointment, sadness, and anger that were constitutive of the feeling of being rendered into a marginal population.

The three themes that organise this chapter are: Muslim women's reactions to their community being stereotyped as foreigners and traitors; as retrograde and backward in comparison to their Hindu brethren; and Bengali Muslims depicted as low caste-converts from Hinduism. Space does not permit me to go into the details of each of these conversations. But, Sarkar's analysis of these oral histories demonstrates, on the one hand, how overwhelmingly the stories narrated by individual women are "framed by the larger stories of the nation, the conflict between Muslims and Hindus, and/or a narrative of progress, presumably towards an already defined goal of modernity."¹² On the other hand, the details which emerge over the course of these conversations – about Calcutta neighbourhoods and neighbourliness, about mothers, grandmothers, and other women from previous generations, her interviewees' experiences of being the first Muslim girl in school – prove Sarkar's contention about the invisibility of Muslim women in historical narratives of the

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nation state. Taken together, the oral accounts eloquently testify to these women's desire to present themselves against the backdrop of an unfolding national history. As well they draw attention to the inadequacy of that history to fully represent these women's everyday lived experiences.

Sarkar's aim is not simply to understand the processes or contexts in which such marginalisation occurred. It also has to do with establishing a "linkage" between these earlier discourses and present day social inequality and injustice. In the conclusion to *Visible Histories*, she turns to two moments from contemporary Indian politics – the Shah Bano case and the atrocities against Muslim women during the 2002 riots in Gujarat – to elaborate on this point. The Hindu right, Indian feminist groups, the Supreme Court of India, and the Muslim personal law board were all variously involved in the process of adjudicating whether or not an elderly Muslim lady, Shah Bano, could claim alimony from her husband of 40 years. The long and public controversy that ensued, argues Sarkar, brings to light "the inadequacy of the set of choices available to her (Shah Bano), choices that pit her location as a woman against her identification as a Muslim in contemporary India or, worse yet, bring the two together in the composite figures of the hapless victim." This process she concludes "has been consistently the case since the late 19th century".¹³ Likewise, the Gujarat violence draws attention to "the liminality of certain women vis-à-vis the state and the law" and shows them as both minor and dispensable figures in debates on Indian citizenship.¹⁴

No Community Is Monolithic

Sarkar writes from the standpoint of a post-colonial feminist scholar seeking a link between present-day practices of discrimination against Muslim women with the trajectory of Muslim women's lives in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. This scholarly subject position contributes to her book's strength and perhaps to its shortcomings as well. In her impassioned commitment to understand the processes that rendered Muslim women invisible, Sarkar ends up presenting a homogeneous picture of the group

that throughout the book she refers to as the Hindu/Brahmo middle classes. This group emerges from her account as one unified by their hatred and condescension towards Muslims, irrespective of their economic and social location, gender, and caste differences. On what historical grounds can we attribute this manner of unity to Bengali Hindus and Brahmos when part of what drives Sarkar's critique is the assumption (and one that I entirely agree with) that no community is monolithic?

Indeed, looking back to the colonial period one finds evidence of Brahmos like Debendranath Tagore (and Rammohun Roy before him) who were learned in Farsi; Girish Chandra Sen (Bhai Girish) who completed the first Bengali translation of the *Quran*; Rabindranath Tagore who was deeply critical of certain swadeshi attitudes towards the Muslim Bengali peasantry; or even a saintly figure like Ramakrishna who carried out various mystical experiments involving Tantric and Islamic rites. This is not to say that Hindus and Brahmos did not display bigotry. But just as the figure of the Muslim woman disappeared from academic studies that viewed them as a homogeneous, monolithic community, the political passion motivating this study runs the risk of producing the same effect on Hindus and Brahmos. Indeed it prevents an appreciation of figures like Dvijendral Ray, noted playwright and author, who wrote plays like *Jahanara* which revolves around the pain experienced by the Mughal emperor Shahjahan when he was imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb. Incidentally, Jahanara was Aurangzeb's older sister and not his daughter as Sarkar writes.¹⁵ Sarkar's project could have been further nuanced if she had widened the scope of her analysis to include works of fiction which are teeming with issues such as romantic love (in some instances between an unmarried girl and a married man as in Akhtar Mahal's *Niyantrita*), the "new woman", and other issues of the day. Many of these were, in fact, first serialised in the journals that are part of Sarkar's archives.¹⁶

In other words, Sarkar's post-colonial stance – in this case implying a position where the scholar reads the past through

the lens of the present – overdetermines her analysis of the past. It leaves unclear the nature of the overlap she posits between accounts on "colonial companions" and her own subject of study, the Bengali Muslim woman from the turn of the 20th century. It also imputes to a large number of Hindu men and women the same feelings of vengefulness and disdain towards their Muslim counterparts without fully establishing the claim. And finally, it forgoes a closer look at Bengali Muslim women's varied literary production during the said period. At the same time, the book's strength and contribution is evident in its passionate and bold attempt to begin the process of contextualising the present by returning to a comparatively under-researched aspect of the past.

Email: rochonam@yahoo.com

NOTES

- 1 Ritu Menon and Zoya Hasan, cited in Mahua Sarkar, *Visible Histories Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 198.
- 2 Ibid: p 196.
- 3 Ibid: p 197.
- 4 Ibid: p 4.
- 5 Ibid: p 5.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Thus T Sarkar's account of revivalist Hindu nationalism in the late 19th century has as its referents both the British rulers and the Bengali Muslim; Amin's work on the Muslim *bhadramahila* between 1876 and 1939 is in active conversation with the histories of their Hindu counterparts; and Sinha's analysis of colonial masculinity charts conceptions of Bengali manhood within an expansive "imperial social formation" that includes the British, Anglo-Indians, Muslims, and Hindus. The choice of conducting research on a community need not always reflect a prejudice on the historian's part.
- 8 Ibid: p 20.
- 9 Ibid: p 29.
- 10 Ibid: p 25.
- 11 Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1994; P K Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 1999.
- 12 Sarkar: p 195.
- 13 Ibid: p 202.
- 14 Ibid: p 203.
- 15 Ibid: p 73.
- 16 The only fiction she mentions briefly is by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

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