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# Angel Undone: Interrogating Hyderabad Muslim Femininity, Colonial Modernity and *Sharafat* in *Zohra*

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## ABSTRACT

Zeenuth Futehally's understudied *Zohra* (1951) has generated some renewed interest due to its representation of Muslim womanhood amidst political and cultural change in South Asia. I examine how the fading *pardah* system and redefined notions of *sharafat* (respectability) create a crisis of femininity for the protagonist. The destabilisation of *sharafat* reveals the tensions underlying the figure of the 'new woman' in South Asia. This article examines how the inherently patriarchal nature of reform impacts *Zohra's* articulation of political agency. I analyse the text as a larger social commentary through the lens of Indo-Muslim and Hyderabad cultural memory.

## KEYWORDS

Feminism; Hyderabad; Indo-Muslim literature; modernity; new woman; nostalgia; Partition; *sharafat*; Zeenuth Futehally; *Zohra*

From a life of utter seclusion, she had been thrust into a completely new and bewildering world.<sup>1</sup>

## Part 1: Introduction

*Zohra* (1951) by Zeenuth Futehally is one of the earliest novels in English by an Indian Muslim woman. The novel was unfortunately out of print and largely forgotten until a reprint, commissioned by her daughter, Rummana Futehally Denby, was released by Oxford University Press in 2004. *Zohra* is the story of a privileged Muslim woman in 1920s and 1930s Hyderabad, who is forced to sacrifice her intellectual aspirations for a loveless marriage with an older man named Bashir. *Zohra* finds herself staunchly opposed to her husband's pro-empire/Muslim League political beliefs and her sensitive nature clashes with Bashir's stolid, unromantic temperament. She falls in love with her nationalist brother-in-law, Hamid, and their romance is tragically doomed. Trapped by duty, *Zohra* despairs her fate, even as she goes on a fruitless European tour. Hamid is imprisoned for anti-colonial activities, while

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1. Zeenuth Futehally, *Zohra*, ed. Rummana Futehally Denby (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1951]): 86–87.

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Zohra engages in Gandhian social work, during which she contracts the plague. The novel ends in Zohra's death, with Hamid beside her in her final moments. Thus, *Zohra* tells the story of a Muslim woman from a liminal generation 'thrust into a completely new and bewildering world' of colonial modernity. The cost of this transition is anxiety, erasure and death for Zohra, whose narrative is representative of 'many a young girl of a generation'.<sup>2</sup>

While it finds passing mention in some anthologies, serious critical engagement with *Zohra* has been attempted only recently by Ambreen Hai, Suvir Kaul, Diviani Chaudhuri, Nazia Akhtar and Tajuddin Ahmed.<sup>3</sup> Of the relatively sparse pre-existing scholarship on *Zohra*, Ambreen Hai's work offers some of the most in-depth critical engagement. She examines the novel's feminist (critique of the *pardah* system and arranged marriages) and nationalist themes (its Gandhian and Nehruvian politics) to argue that *Zohra* espouses a modern, secular Muslim politics in post-Partition India. According to Hai, the text seeks to assert 'heterogeneity among Muslims, and to demand rightful belonging to the nation of members of a minority community based on their nationalist commitments and desire for reform'.<sup>4</sup> She posits that the twinning of adulterous and 'patriotic desires' in the novel are central to its emancipatory, feminist politics.<sup>5</sup> Suvir Kaul, in his analysis of *Zohra*, examines it as a reformist text of Muslim life which 'normalizes female desire' and a novelistic exploration of the 'participation of Muslim elites in civic and political life and the passage of women into the public sphere'.<sup>6</sup> While there is no doubt that Zohra is indeed a daring, noteworthy representation of an Indian Muslim heroine, this article attempts to examine the relationship between reform and agency in colonial Hyderabad and the broader Indo-Muslim context. Zohra's character arc offers a searing critique of the hollow promises of reformist emancipation—particularly her inability to find romantic fulfilment with Bashir, the 'reformer husband/patriarch'. Bashir is kind and attentive to his bride, but she remains a mere 'good housewife' to him. This is contrasted with Hamid, whose romantic desire for Zohra coexists with their sense of intellectual/spiritual companionship. Bashir, instead, is focused on moulding Zohra to become a means to perform his *sharif*, elite cosmopolitan identity. It is this critical feature of the text—wherein *sharafat* (respectability) becomes

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2. K.P.S Menon, 'Introduction to the Original Edition of *Zohra*', in Zeenuth Futehally, *Zohra*, ed. Rummana Futehally Denby (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1951]): n.p.

3. Notable titles among these surveys which actually mention *Zohra* are: Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English* (New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971); Eunice de Souza, *Women's Voices: Selections from the Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002). Scholars cited here are: Ambreen Hai, 'Adultery behind *Purdah* and the Politics of Indian Nationalism', *Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 2 (2013): 317–45; Suvir Kaul, 'Women, Reform, and Nationalism in Three Novels of Muslim Life', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. Ulka Anjaria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 133–46; 138, 142; Diviani Chaudhuri, 'The House in South Asian Muslim Women's Early Anglophone Life-Writing and Novels' (unpublished PhD thesis, SUNY Binghamton, 2016); Nazia Akhtar, 'Recasting the Outcast: Hyderabad and Hyderabad Subjectivities in Two Literary Texts', in *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts: City Margins in South Asian Literature*, ed. Madhurima Chakraborty and Umme Al-Wazedi (New York: Routledge, 2017): 21–38; Tajuddin Ahmed, 'Brothers in Arms: Tracing the Trajectory of Colonial Muslim Politics in Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra*', *Journal of the Department of English, Vidyasagar University* 16 (2023): 436–48, <http://inet.vidyasagar.ac.in:8080/jspui/handle/123456789/6756>.

4. Hai, 'Adultery behind *Purdah*', 339.

5. Futehally, *Zohra*, 35; Hai, 'Adultery behind *Purdah*', 325.

6. Kaul, 'Women', 138, 142.

a false promise of emancipation for women, and a false modulation of urban cosmopolitanism—on which I focus my analysis.

Furthering Hai's argument, I analyse this novel as a text of social transition in late colonial Hyderabad and the Urdu-speaking Muslim cultural milieu. *Zohra* illuminates the changing conceptions around femininity and domesticity for the 'middle-class' and 'elite' *sharif* Muslim woman belonging to a generation dubbed 'daughters of reform' by historian Gail Minault.<sup>7</sup> Zohra's recognition of the 'modern' as a new form of oppressive patriarchy is perhaps Futehally's most fascinating achievement, in which, unlike Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (which is clearly an influence over the novel), the reformer husband is not pedestalled but critiqued.<sup>8</sup> Besides Hai, Nazia Akhtar's comprehensive analysis of the Hyderabad political subjectivities at play in *Zohra* is key to understanding the context in which the novel pans out. However, I draw attention to the relationship between gender and local context to reveal how the novel sketches gender relations in Hyderabad Muslim society. Further, I argue that *Zohra* is an important text to study when it comes to twentieth century Muslim women's writing not just because of its emphasis on place and context but also as a critique of the conventional logic of reform by elevating the agentic subjectivity of a Muslim heroine who remains sympathetic in the eyes of the reader despite her transgressions against *sharif* values.

Diviani Chaudhuri's doctoral thesis, which examines spatiality and the home in anglophone fictions of Muslim women in colonial India, explores the deep ambiguity of Zohra's response to coming out of *pardah* (which she terms as a 'spatial crisis').<sup>9</sup> I expand Chaudhuri's spatial focus to think about alternative temporalities in the novel—particularly in relation to colonial modernity and post-Independence Indian and Hyderabad Muslim identity. The novel intervenes in the debate about the changing meaning of *sharafat* in late colonial India. In this period, as scholars have shown, Muslim reformers worked to redefine this status as a category that could combine elements of feudal culture, Muslim identity and high-class status with progressive ideals around education, reform and nationalism. Women were used to secure the new category of *sharafat*, as patriarchal reformers encouraged them to move away from restrictive practices such as *pardah* and the *zenana* towards progressive and cosmopolitan ideals, but largely in ways that allowed patriarchal authority to remain intact. Building on scholarship that has noted this tension in the novel, this article argues that *Zohra* uses emotion and sentiment to critique the category of *sharafat* in late colonial India as patriarchal and parochial. Zohra's tragic death thus becomes the embodiment of this flux for the Muslim woman, with her quite literally succumbing to patriarchal tradition and unable to visualise a future for herself in independent India. This crisis of femininity is, then, a crisis of gendered temporality for the Indian Muslim woman.

This article is split into three distinct parts (including the introduction). Part 2 contextualises the trajectory of reform and colonial modernity within the Indo-Muslim

7. Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 267.

8. *Zohra* was published almost a decade before Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1960), which also critiques reformist discourse amongst elite Muslims and has received far more scholarly attention.

9. Chaudhuri, 'House', 96.

cultural milieu, after which I pay specific attention to the tensions which underlie the Hyderabad elite cultural identity in this period. Finally, in Part 3, I examine the tensions around class, dress and mobility that are foregrounded in the text through the protagonist's navigation of *sharif* identity and the consequent spatio-temporal crisis of femininity.

## Part 2: Locating Zohra

### ***Reform and social change among Indian Muslims: Sharif identity and girls' education***

The process of negotiation between modernity and gender was anxiety-ridden and normatively coded for South Asian Muslims.<sup>10</sup> In traditional South Asian Muslim society, the domestic space was divided into the *zenana* (feminine) and the *mardana* (masculine) areas of the household—distinctly separate but mutually interdependent—under the *purdah* system.<sup>11</sup> However, *purdah* was by no means uniformly followed across the Muslim community, with upper-caste, feudal Muslims (*shurafa* or *ashraf*) associating with it far more than the working-class *ajlaf* or *arzal* castes.<sup>12</sup> The construction of ideal *ashraf* Muslim femininity, rooted in a respectability politics that emerges from the reconfiguration of *sharif* identities under colonialism, is key to comprehending the socio-historical stakes at the heart of *Zohra*, whose protagonist becomes an allegorical figure to represent the dilemmas and sacrifices of her generation.<sup>13</sup> Futehally problematises the notion of idealised Muslim femininity to illustrate the implications of the social changes in late colonial India as well as the Partition, and their impact on the psyche of what Partha Chatterjee influentially theorised as the 'New Woman', exemplified by Zohra herself. My analysis borrows from this framework of the 'new woman', who is subjected to 'new patriarchy' but also derives 'ideological strength from making the goal of cultural refinement through education', and, via a complex negotiation with this new patriarchy, also opens 'a domain where woman was an autonomous subject'.<sup>14</sup>

10. Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); see also Asiya Alam, 'Polygyny, Family and Sharafat: Discourses amongst North Indian Muslims, circa 1870–1918', *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 631–68, <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X10000168>; Margrit Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11. This practice was also observed among North Indian Hindu households.

12. For more information on caste among South Asian Muslims, please refer to Imtiaz Ahmed, *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims* (Delhi: Manohar Book Press, 1978); see also Shireen Azam, 'Blind Spots: Caste in Contemporary Muslim Autobiographies', *The Caravan*, April 30, 2020, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://caravanmagazine.in/literature/blind-spots>. In recent years, *ashraf* families are moving away from *purdah*, but veiling has become a more common practice for *ajlaf* and *arzal* Muslims seeking greater respectability: see Zarina Bhatti, 'Muslim Women in Uttar Pradesh: Social Mobility and Directions of Change', in *Women in Contemporary India and South Asia*, ed. Alfred D'Souza (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1980): 199–212.

13. *Ashraf* as a term has differing caste-class associations, but here refers to the Muslim upper classes (who often claimed foreign descent or were upper-caste Hindu converts to Islam). For more information on this, please refer to David Lelyveld, 'Ashraf', in *Keywords in South Asian Studies*, SOAS South Asia Institute, accessed June 25, 2024, [https://www.academia.edu/3992875/ashraf\\_SOAS\\_Keywords\\_](https://www.academia.edu/3992875/ashraf_SOAS_Keywords_); Jennifer Dubrow, 'Sharafat and Bhal Mānsī: A New Perspective on Respectability in *Fasana-e Azad*', *South Asian History and Culture* 9, no. 2, (2018): 181–93, doi:10.1080/19472498.2018.1446796.

14. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993): 127–28. Chatterjee was focused on the construction of the Hindu

We can see how the larger changes observed in gender relations in the upper and middle classes of the Muslim community during colonial India shapes the novel. While in the pre-colonial period, *sharafat* implied an Islamicate ‘cultural style associated with the heritage of the Mughal court, in dress, manners, aesthetics, and above all, language and literature’, it saw some changes after the consolidation of British rule in India.<sup>15</sup> From the nineteenth century onwards, as scholars like Jennifer Dubrow and Margrit Pernau have shown, the concept of *sharafat* becomes secularised, based on codes of civility and social mobility. Pernau’s research, in particular, showcases the emergence of a new *ashraf* in the post-1857 North Indian Muslim milieu, which distinguishes itself from the ‘old *ashraf*’ and the lower classes by emphasising a ‘middle-class virtue of achievement’.<sup>16</sup> In simpler terms, *sharafat* in post-1857 Muslim South Asia became a social process which implied the partial, careful adoption of *ashraf* identity and Western cultural norms amongst upper- and middle-class Muslims in colonial South Asia to advance social mobility. Beyond a mere descriptor of class identity, the term also expresses ideas of family honour and respectability.<sup>17</sup>

As Faisal Devji and Asiya Alam argue in their research on *sharif* Muslims in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the contours of *sharafat* were contingent on Muslim women. Devji’s work traces the shift after 1857 in the occupation of public space by Muslim men, which made the previously invisible *zaif* (women, youth, slaves) turn into the subjects of reform, becoming representatives of Islamic values.<sup>18</sup> Alam writes that ‘as they evolved into a professional class claiming the *ashraf* position, one of the guarantees of “respectability” and “Islam” was the home. Family lineage and descent constituted this *sharafat*’.<sup>19</sup> Thus, *sharif* Muslim femininity implied that the woman’s intellectual capabilities often were only of ornamental value to the image of idealised domesticity, utilised solely for improving the class mobility of *sharif* classes. In Shenila Khoja-Moolji’s work we find a recognition of the inherent instability that the gendered performance of *sharafat* entails: ‘While there was an agreement that women made the ideal site to display familial social status, there was less agreement on which kinds of performances of women would signal this *sharafat*’.<sup>20</sup> The tensions that emerge in this time of social flux help us observe the contested nature of *sharafat* as a concept and practice. Becoming a *sharif* woman ‘included distinct responsibilities and distinctly gendered ways of behaving from a very early stage’ of girlhood, with education, domestic responsibilities, religiosity, clothing, *purdah* and grooming all signalling *sharif* identity.<sup>21</sup>

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‘*bhadramahila*’ in Bengal, but this attempt at ‘modernising’ the woman was also happening among Muslims.

15. Lelyveld, ‘Ashraf’.

16. Dubrow, ‘*Sharafat* and *Bhal Mānsī*’; Pernau, *Ashraf*, 241.

17. Khanum Shaikh, ‘Intimate Critique: Toward a Feminism from Within’, *Feminist Studies* 48, no. 2 (2022): 369–94; 371, doi:10.1353/fem.2022.0032.

18. Faisal Devji, ‘Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women’s Reform, 1857–1900’, in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, Vol. 2, ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007): 99–114; 112.

19. Alam, ‘Polygyny’, 666.

20. Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal*, 57.

21. Ruby Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India: The Girl Child and the Art of Playfulness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 10.

While scholarships on *ashrafs* and *sharafat* have tended to focus on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the concepts have remained important through the Partition and after.<sup>22</sup> As we see in texts like *Zohra*, the changes to the politics of respectability are further complicated due to anxieties of minoritisation for Muslims, a prospect that was on the horizon by the 1930s. Sarah Fatima Waheed's research into the censorship and backlash that was faced by the *Angāre* collective after the publication of their book gives us some insight into this period, particularly the ways in which *zaif* Muslims began to challenge *sharif* as representatives of the community by 'exposing the multiple layers of minoritisation within the Muslim community, in particular the disenfranchised *ajlāf* for whom the 'existing notions of *sharif* ethical conduct and *tehzīb* (culture) had failed.'<sup>23</sup> As Akhtar has highlighted, *Zohra*'s critical perspective is centred around its elite protagonist but its exploration of the subjectivities of the other categories of *zaif* is limited to the peripheries of this narrative, clashing particularly when it comes to women's political agency and education.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth noting that reformist efforts to educate women were largely framed in ways that could keep male Muslim authority intact. The question of women's emancipation in colonial India was broadly framed around the language of 'reform' as opposed to 'rights' and was initially an elite preoccupation. Amongst Muslims, this was often spearheaded by male educationists like Sheikh Abdullah and Syed Karamat Husain and the project of women's education sought to replicate Western traditions of formal learning in schools and colleges, offering an alternative to Christian mission schools.<sup>25</sup> It is in this context that we must examine the emergence of *sharafat* as a process for Muslim women in colonial India. The establishment of *zenana* schools and all-women's colleges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was followed by the greater political participation of Muslim women in the Khilafat movement and then the broader national movement. Khizar Humayun Ansari writes about how liberal *ashraf* networks provided a progressive and broad-minded home for women writers to develop their intellectual potential. He also notes the role of women's magazines like *Tehzib-i-Niswan*, *Khatun* and *Ismat*, which were not only instrumental in disseminating modern ideas among Muslim women, but also led to the emergence of networks through which women communicated

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22. Khoja-Moolji's research examines colonial India till 1920 and then moves on to independent Pakistan. Both Pernau and Devji's research extends till the 1900s. Similarly, Asiya Alam's article closes at 1918: Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal*; Alam, 'Polygyny'.

23. Sarah Fatima Waheed, *Hidden Histories of Pakistan: Censorship, Literature, and Secular Nationalism in Late Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022): 60.

24. Akhtar, 'Recasting the Outcast', 30.

25. Women reformers like Muhammadi Begum and Begum Khurshid Mirza were also prominent forces, but they often worked in partnership with male social reformers. The differences and similarities between the perspectives of women and men invested in social reform have been examined by Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal*, 60. Another notable name is Fatima Sheikh, who along with the Bahujan educationists Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, ran a school for girls in Pune. Unfortunately, not enough scholarship exists on Fatima Sheikh's life and work, but see Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'What a Photograph Tells Us about Fatima Sheikh', *The Indian Express*, January 16, 2022, accessed June 14, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/photograph-savitribai-phule-fatima-sheikh-7725362/>; see also Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism among Indian Muslim Women, 1920–1947* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000): 44.

and organised.<sup>26</sup> Notably, these spaces for women's discourse were often edited by reformist men.

Indian men, striving to rise within the ranks of the colonial economy, felt the need to partner with women who projected a modern, cosmopolitan image. However, these positions were designed to be accessible only to those who had English education, naturally favouring the feudal classes, who had disproportionate access to this cultural capital. When a generation of educated men returned from their time in England, they discovered that Indian women were entirely unfamiliar with this new language of cultural exchange. This posed a significant challenge in terms of finding suitable matches and maintaining their *sharif* status. For anglicised Muslim men belonging to *ashraf* circles, it was crucial to extend the Westernised atmosphere to their domestic lives and receive support in their professional growth. Additionally, discussions on marriages that emphasised the importance of 'a meeting of the minds' rather than solely matching caste and class identities were becoming more prevalent. Love marriage, defined as a marital union where parental consent was not essential, challenged the traditional arranged marriages in Indian society, which were typically facilitated by community elders. Therefore, love marriage was perceived as 'western', particularly when it crossed caste and religious boundaries. Women exercising their choice in selecting partners were seen as threatening the social order by disrupting the rigid codes of caste purity.<sup>27</sup> Much of the writing that documents the decades between the 1920s and the 1940s showcases how this was a 'period of transition' for elite communities through their exploration of cross-generational changes in the selection of spouses.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the shifts in the economy transformed the nature of arranged marriages, which was reconstituted to accommodate the demands of a modernising India while still maintaining caste-class hierarchies.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Reconstructing gender and Muslim identity in Hyderabad***

The changes in gender relations that are represented in *Zohra* not only need to be contextualised in relation to the broader transformation of Indian Muslim identity but also need to be situated in their specific Hyderabad context, which is key to Futehally's narrative. Due to the unique history of Hyderabad, with the multiple geographical, linguistic and cultural specificities that distinguish it from the general North Indian Muslim milieu, the cultural shifts *Zohra* documents need further contextualisation. Hyderabad has a long history associated with Muslim rule and became the largest and wealthiest of British India's princely states after Asaf Jah II,

26. Khizar Humayun Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims, 1917–1947* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015): 180. *Tehzib-i-Niswan* was edited by a couple, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and Muhammadi Begum, while the rest were founded by men.

27. Zehra Kazmi, 'Misfit of Modernity: The Anxiety of Belonging in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*', *Harf: A Journal of South Asian Studies* 4 (2019): 101–16; 104, 112.

28. Mobeen Hussain 'Sunlight on a Broken Column and *The Heart Divided* as Autobiographically-Inspired Realist Texts: Navigating Gendered Socio-Political Identities in Genre Fiction', in *Sultana's Sisters: Genre, Gender, and Genealogy in South Asian Muslim Women's Fiction*, ed. Haris Qadeer and P.K. Yasser Arafath (Oxford: Routledge, 2022): 160–76; 169.

29. For more on arranged and love marriages in India, see Perveez Mody, *The Intimate State: Love Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (Delhi: Routledge, 2008); Rochona Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).



the erstwhile nizam of Hyderabad, entered into an alliance with the East India Company in 1768. In Minault's work, we see an early reference to the specific changes happening among the Hyderabad Muslim elite that gives us an insight into the unique cultural landscape *Zohra* recreates. Minault gives us an account of a *sharif* Hyderabad woman, Masuma Begum, who rose to become the first Muslim woman minister in independent India. After her marriage to an Oxford educated man, Masuma gradually gave up *purdah* at the behest of her anglicised husband. Initially, she was only introduced to close friends of her husband. Masuma reports that after 'the Nizam's two sons married Turkish princesses, mixed parties became part of Hyderabad court society. When the princesses...issued an invitation...one could hardly refuse, nor could one inquire who was going to be there.... *Purdah* barriers began breaking down among the Hyderabad elite.'<sup>30</sup> The role of the Turkish princesses in changing the standards around *purdah* and mixed company is extremely crucial to understanding the specific regional nuances of Muslim identity at play here.

Famously one of the wealthiest rulers in the world, Mir Osman Ali Khan, the last nizam of Hyderabad, arranged a powerful match between his sons and the Turkish princesses Durrushehvar and Nilufer. Both belonged to the recently deposed Ottoman ruling dynasty, with Durrushehvar being the daughter of the last Ottoman caliph, Abdulmejid II, and Nilufer being his niece. Durrushehvar and Nilufer, raised in Turkey and France, famously never observed *purdah* and participated in mixed gatherings freely. The historian Betul Basaran documents their involvement in early reformist work for women's education and health in Hyderabad along with the likes of Sarojini and Padmaja Naidu and Masuma Begum (who is mentioned above).<sup>31</sup> The glamorous princesses, photographed extensively for their beauty, were presented as the new face of modernising Muslim Hyderabad and became representatives of the new vision of *sharafat* for elite Muslim women in the period.

The 1930s and 1940s in Hyderabad, as with the rest of India, saw an increasingly polarised public divided along religious lines; however, the specific context of the Telangana Armed Struggle, the nizam's feudal rule, the rise of the paramilitary Razakars and the role of the Indian state added more complicated layers to the conflict, all of which does not easily map into the Hindu/Sikh vs Muslim violence that was observed in North India. For a long time, Partition has been understood as a North Indian phenomenon, with limited focus on the regions that were not physically divided between Indian and Pakistan. Recent scholarship has attempted to address this gap in scholarship, which examines the tumultuous circumstances under which the independent princely state of Hyderabad was annexed by the Indian union.<sup>32</sup> Nazia Akhtar writes about how the 'literal and metaphorical idea of "absorption" of Hyderabad into India can be read in oppositional terms' from the 'partitioning in Punjab and Bengal' but was 'no less violent, dislocating, and devastating

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30. Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 273.

31. Betul Basaran, 'Women's Transnational Networks and Philanthropic Work in Hyderabad State before Partition', *Mulberry Tree* magazine (2023), accessed June 25, 2024, [https://issuu.com/smcpublications/docs/mulberry\\_tree\\_spring\\_2023web/s/23497316](https://issuu.com/smcpublications/docs/mulberry_tree_spring_2023web/s/23497316).

32. See A.G. Noorani, *The Destruction of Hyderabad* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013); Afsar Mohammad, *Remaking History: 1948 Police Action and the Muslims of Hyderabad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

than partitioning.<sup>33</sup> *Zohra* is steeped in the cosmopolitanism of Hyderabad: its bazaars, landscapes, clubs, poets and customs imbue the novel with a rich socio-cultural subtext. In a fascinating moment of reflecting on his Muslim identity, Hamid remarks:

Anyway we Muslims possess the proud heritage of three different cultures—Indian, Arabic, and Persian—flowing through our veins in one tumultuous stream. Hyderabad, at least, has tried to retain parts of all these and to add the new western, as the most vital stream in present-day life. We shall yet achieve that unity of East and West—that much-desired synthesis.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth outlining, foremost, that the memorialisation of undivided India and a reaffirmation of Hyderabad Muslim identity are key concerns for the plot on a structural level. The novel was published in 1951 and documents many of the political trends and conversations emerging in India during the 1930s, thus reflecting many post-Partition concerns of Muslims seeking to belong in an independent India. The fact that the novel ends before Partition is an evocative choice: Futehally wants to freeze a moment in time when Muslims and their Indianness weren't two concepts that could be easily excluded from each other. Secularism and nationalist commitment also become Futehally's rationale to argue for Muslim belonging in independent India.<sup>35</sup> The state saw massive violence by the paramilitary Razakars in the wake of Partition, unleashed by the nizam who persecuted anyone who opposed the idea of 'Muslim Rule' in Hyderabad. To evoke nostalgia for the Muslim liberalism of the 1920s and 1930s then 'marks a literary attempt to reinstate a multitude of historical Hyderabad urban subject positions which does not coincide with the dangerous, rabidly communal Razakars.'<sup>36</sup> Afsar Mohammad's *Remaking History: 1948 Police Action and the Muslims of Hyderabad* gives us greater insight into the new post-colonial modernity that Hyderabad Muslims sought to adopt in the aftermath of the horrific brutalities of Operation Polo or police action on Muslim communities in Hyderabad, which I argue is a conception that informs Futehally's ethical world-view as well. Beyond its commentary on gender, the text serves as politically useful nostalgia that works as a corrective to one-sided representations and wilful forgetfulness about the multitude of Muslim identities that existed in pre-Partition India and colonial Hyderabad. While *Zohra* is undoubtedly influenced by its *nawabi* setting, its sympathies lie with characters who are critical of its feudal power structures and emblematic of a cosmopolitan Indo-Muslim identity that is both hyper-local and also simultaneously nationalist. However, Futehally seems mindful of the fact that this addition of the 'new western stream' to Hyderabad culture was not without difficulty, particularly with regard to the changing conceptions around women's social and political roles. As I examine in Part 3, while the novel constructs a pre-Partition Hyderabad liberalism, it is also critiques its insufficiencies—challenging the fantasy of *sharif* Muslim femininity exemplified by the Turkish princesses.

33. Nazia Akhtar, 'From Nizam to Nation: The Representation of Partition in Literary Narratives about Hyderabad, Deccan' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2013): 237.

34. Futehally, *Zohra*, 173.

35. Hai, 'Adultery', 66.

36. Akhtar, 'Recasting the Outcast', 26.

### Part 3: Critiquing reformist patriarchy in *Zohra*

#### *Navigating reform as a rebel*

Uma Vasudev, in her review of *Zohra*'s 2004 reprint writes:

Zohra's rebellion has a sad if determined face not the defiance of an intellectually contoured aggression, hence her quietly defiant empathising with her brother-in-law who is a Gandhian revolutionary but her equally quiet adherence to the feudal norms of a traditional Hyderabad aristocracy.<sup>37</sup>

The dichotomy Vasudev draws between 'defiant empathising' and 'quiet adherence' signals a tightrope act for Zohra as a *sharif* Muslim woman and it is this dilemma between duty and defiance that marks her struggles. In this section, I seek to elaborate the affective nuances of how Futehally constructs the ways in which Zohra navigates colonial modernity and breaks the mould of patriarchal expectations to assert her agency.

The novel starts with a description of the gendered spatial organisation of the traditional Muslim home, with the tension between appropriate code of conduct for *pardah* women and the possibility of transgression foregrounded in the opening interaction between Unnie, the maid, and Zohra. Futehally's writing guides the reader's attention to the intimate, concerned but ultimately surveilling gaze of Unnie, who becomes 'the female upholder of cultural traditions and gender and class norms'.<sup>38</sup> We are also given an insight into Zohra's independent nature by noting her resistance to being treated like a 'china doll', an ornamental and delicate object—qualities that the patriarchal system she exists in force her to eventually unwillingly adopt.<sup>39</sup> Later in the chapter, a minor uproar occurs when Unnie spots a young boy spying on the girls while ostensibly plucking tamarind from a tree on the other end of the garden. Here, the description of the *zenana* extends beyond the walled garden, to the *zenana* courtyard and reception rooms. Immediately, the reader is alerted to the gendered spatial organisation of this traditional Muslim home. The appropriate code of conduct, reinforced by the surveilling gaze of a patriarchal authority (albeit a woman here), determines the behaviour of its female residents. Hai posits the text as set up as a critique of *pardah* culture from the start, 'extending' its criticism to arranged marriages and their limitations.<sup>40</sup> *Zohra*, however, is not only a reformist text that critiques *pardah* culture but one that also attacks the limited agency granted to women by male reformers.

Within Zohra's family, there is a degree of hesitance and disapproval about her introduction to Western customs and education, but it is deemed as an 'essential' move to secure a better match for her. Zohra's father tells his wife: 'Begum, English is essential these days.... All educated young men want their wives to speak it like the memsahibs do.'<sup>41</sup> Zohra's educational aspirations are indulged by her father, who

37. Uma Vasudev. 'Book Review: *Zohra* by Zeenuth Futehally, Rumanna Futehally Denby', *Indian Literature* 49, no. 2 (226) (2005): 219–23; 219.

38. Hai, 'Adultery', 324.

39. Futehally, *Zohra*, 1.

40. *Ibid.*, 328.

41. *Ibid.*, 11.

sees them as a childish whim of his daughter. When his wife pushes him to consider putting an end to her studies as she worries that Zohra may be unable to 'settle down to domesticity' because of the 'discontent' her failed aspirations may cause, he remarks: 'Begum, her heart is set on books.... Why mar her happiness? Adult lives are perforce dedicated to worry, whilst the joys of childhood and youth soon become a dream.'<sup>42</sup> This idea of the 'girl' as a subject worthy of education and finding the space to 'play' is relevant to the category of *sharafat* here.<sup>43</sup>

The novel reveals that the discarding of traditional Islamic femininity by Zohra is, in fact, not a linear feminist oppression-to-emancipation trajectory but a refashioning of patriarchal norms. Minault reminds us that the many real women who came out of *pardah* in the early twentieth century were 'dutiful daughters who left *pardah* only with the sanction of their families, whether natal or conjugal.'<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Zohra also comes out of *pardah* solely as a result of her arranged marriage, following her wifely duties as demanded by her liberal husband. Her wedding is a particularly anxious and stressful episode for Zohra, with her 'convulsive sobs' and 'cold hands' worrying her bridesmaids.<sup>45</sup> She feels objectified to be put on display during the ceremony. The comfort and ease that Zohra experiences in the segregated *zenana* of her natal home, where she is surrounded by female companionship, is not easily replicated in her modern husband's home. This movement into the new womanhood of modern India is mediated by patriarchal demands of a different kind.<sup>46</sup>

Despite being the main obstacle between Zohra and Hamid, Bashir is by no means the antagonist in the novel. He displays all the signs of being a good husband by the standards set by a traditional arranged marriage—attentive, respectful and even romantic at times—and, yet, we are given Zohra's perspective on how they never seem to be in sync. As the reformer-husband, Bashir does encourage Zohra's intellectual pursuits and nudges her to come out of *pardah*. Zohra even acknowledges a debt of gratitude and says that while her feelings for him are deep, they are just not romantic.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear from the start of their relationship that they are a poor match—finding it hard to connect with each other in terms of their temperaments, passions and politics. His stolid, brusque approach towards life and romance makes her wonder if he is someone who would 'place beauty itself on the dissecting table and not feel it a desecration.'<sup>48</sup> Zohra is often described as uncomfortable and awkward when receiving his demonstrations of romance, trying to 'extricate' herself or feeling 'fearful' of his touch—indicating their lack of chemistry.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, she finds little intellectual companionship in Bashir, whose political views seem to echo either imperialist attitudes or religious separatism, in marked contrast to Zohra's nationalist and secular sympathies. The novel uses the tropes of emotional and intellectual mismatch to critique the reformer husband.

42. *Ibid.*

43. See Lal, *Coming of Age*.

44. Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 280.

45. Futehally, *Zohra*, 61.

46. Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006): 95; see also Hussain, 'Sunlight', 165.

47. Futehally, *Zohra*, 251.

48. *Ibid.*, 78.

49. *Ibid.*, 220, 50.

The greatest harm to their marriage is caused by Bashir's constant attempts to 'modernise' Zohra according to his views and then expressing irritation or condescension whenever she expresses any affinity towards conceptions of modernity that oppose his. Initially, he is amused and condescending about Zohra's 'old-fashioned' ways—her hesitation at coming out of *pardah* or her steady habit of offering *namaz* five times a day. Later, when he finds Zohra expressing political beliefs different to his and leaving the house of her own will to do social work in the slums, he rejects her agency to simply see her as 'indoctrinated' by Hamid, never recognising her own will. In a fit of rage, Zohra responds: 'If I am susceptible, you cannot change me. I shall be influenced by whomsoever I like!'<sup>50</sup> When Hamid rues the fact that convention demands that Bashir has the right to 'possess' Zohra, she argues: 'My mind does not belong to him—he had no use for it. Legally, I am tied to him but my soul and spirit are free.'<sup>51</sup> These attempts at modernising Zohra then simply become ways through which Bashir can maintain patriarchal control in changing times, which she challenges at every step. Zohra recognises that for Bashir, she fulfils the purpose of wife and mother of his children but the divergence in their intellectual aspirations and emotional rhythms means that she can never love him. Earlier in the same exchange, Zohra tearfully remembers that it was on her wedding day to Bashir that 'she had forfeited her freedom, her right to choose.'<sup>52</sup> In emphasising this 'right to choose' by empathetically invoking Zohra's inherent individuality as a human being, Futehally sharply contradicts the norms of *sharafat*, wherein subjectivity is granted to the woman only for the purpose of solidifying community boundaries for the Muslim elite. Thus, the account of a failed marriage with a 'modern', reformist man is uniquely interesting for our purposes—her emotional rejection of Bashir allows the reader to see how male reformer-led conceptions of *sharafat* are a new form of constraint. Futehally emphasises that the biggest danger of a traditional arranged marriage is not just the possibility of abuse, a narrative choice which would have made Bashir easier to chalk out as a villain, but the fundamental denial of choice to the Muslim woman.

However, it is worth noting that Zohra is not just any Muslim woman, but an exceptional one. Thus, the novel elevates Zohra's critique of reformist patriarchy by showing that she meets many of the moral standards of an ideal Muslim woman. The narrative includes repeated references to Zohra's beauty, intelligence (accomplishments in art and reading) and empathy (she performs the role of a good daughter, daughter-in-law and sister selflessly—even giving up a child for adoption to her childless sister-in-law Safia). The prose tends to deify its protagonist as exceptional in her intellectual, physical and moral superiority: sweet-tempered, sensitive and domestic, Zohra is ostensibly cast as an 'angel' representing idealised Islamic domesticity and moral purity. We can spot unmistakable resemblances here between Zohra's positive qualities and the prototypes for good behaviour among *sharif* women in didactic reformist texts from the nineteenth century by Nazir

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50. *Ibid.*, 205.

51. *Ibid.*, 207.

52. *Ibid.*, 200.

Ahmed or Muhammadi Begum.<sup>53</sup> Zohra is contrasted with Safia and Jehan Ara (Siraj's sister), who are presented as petty, loose or ignorant. Sexual transgression notwithstanding, the writing emphasises her angelic virtuosity constantly: she is a 'pearl' and 'a blessing', according to her family.<sup>54</sup> The description of 'angel' is used by a repentant Safia (Zohra's sister-in-law). In fact, there are multiple references to Zohra's supposed angelic character.<sup>55</sup> Yusuf (Safia's husband) warns his wife against believing in Zohra 'as if she were an angel'.<sup>56</sup> In the latter section of the novel, an old slum dweller who is helped by Zohra calls her 'an angel' who 'lives under the blessings of Allah'.<sup>57</sup> Unnie calls Zohra the 'image of modesty' to defend her honour in an argument with Safia and the narrator informs us that '[w]hile Zohra was seriously ill, she (Unnie) could not brook one word that might suggest that she was anything less than an angelic being'.<sup>58</sup> While blameless here, the narrator does remind us that Zohra is emphatically not the flag-bearer of traditional values that Unnie confidently asserts her to be and in this particular weight; quite literally dying under the weight of the expectations of chastity placed on her, Zohra not only pursues a relationship with Hamid, but also experiences romantic/sexual attraction outside her marriage with Siraj. None of these entanglements lead to sex (perhaps Futehally considered this to be too daring a move) and at Zohra's end, their reciprocity is restrained at best, or clearly non-consensual at worst (Jacques, her friend, tries to force himself on her in Paris). And yet, the mere occurrence of such explicit moments of desire in the conservative world these characters inhabit highlights Futehally's subversive treatment of sexuality. The novel reflects the struggle between the virginal conception of the docile, pure *sharif* woman and the aspirations of the 'modern' 'new woman', wherein even the virtuous and exceptional Zohra cannot meet the standards set by modern *sharafat* because of her emotional adultery and quite literally succumbs to its demands. Thus, Zohra's arc exemplifies how the new standards for Muslim women of her generation remain unrealistic, signalling the reality of reform as a false hope for her and others.<sup>59</sup>

A careful look at the caste-class dynamics in the novel reveals that reform is the pursuit of the elite and its fruits don't seem to reach the oppressed classes. It is significant to note here that Zohra's subjectivity is often elevated at the cost of others, particularly the subaltern voices in the novel, who are 'talked down' to by the elite.<sup>60</sup> For instance, Unnie wonders aloud to Zohra, 'What is all this studying for? ...what do you want to do with these foreign books?'<sup>61</sup> The spatiality of Zohra's school—which is 'run by *mems*' and has the boys' school next to it—is also a cause of anxiety for Unnie. She complains about how local boys follow the girls' tonga

53. Nazir Ahmed's *Mirat-ul-Uroos* (1869) and Muhammadi Begum's *Sughar Beti* (1905) were popular Urdu didactic reformist texts. Zohra's character is constructed to have inflections of both Victorian and *ashraf* virtues, which come under scrutiny by the events in the novel.

54. Futehally, *Zohra*, 180.

55. *Ibid.*, 238.

56. *Ibid.*, 176.

57. *Ibid.*, 233.

58. *Ibid.*, 238.

59. Hussain, 'Sunlight', 173.

60. Akhtar, 'Recasting the Outcast', 23.

61. Futehally, *Zohra*, 2.

on bicycles and is appalled at the fact that the girls encourage such attention. She adds, 'It is for such fears that we poor folk discourage our girls from learning to read and write.'<sup>62</sup> In a lot of fiction by elite Muslim women, there is a recurring trope of the older matriarch servant figure who is puzzled by the *ashraf* heroine's educational aspirations.<sup>63</sup> Here the caste-class identity of *sharafat*, wherein women's education is meant to distinguish the *ashraf* from the *ajlaf*, is very important. So the lower caste-class section of Muslim society, represented by Unnie in this narrative, espouses the most conservative notions about women's behaviour and seems to have absolutely no aspiration for the social mobility that can be achieved through education, and stay tied to their feudal roles for their sense of identity.<sup>64</sup> However, as Khoja-Moolji informs us, in this period, women's schooling and public participation was redefined as a careful *sharif* performance, deliberately keeping *ajlaf* women away from these institutions: 'women from the nobility and new *ashraf* social classes were able to re-inscribe their *sharif* status through education, but women from lower-income classes who were omitted from previous ethnic/class-based definitions of *sharafat* continued to be excluded'.

### ***Spatio-temporal crisis of femininity in Zohra***

The novel uses a sentimental tone of excessive emotion to forward this critique, with a pendulum-like emphasis on Zohra's innate goodness vs her daring rebelliousness. This tendency has been remarked upon by critics and is perhaps also responsible for *Zohra*'s poor critical standing in the Indian fiction canon for a long time: it is seen by critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee as a 'sentimental' and somewhat forgettable novel lacking 'irony' and as 'an example of the decadent literary convention influencing a modern novel.'<sup>65</sup> However, we can read excessive emotion in the novel more productively as a crisis of tone, gendered morals, of nation and space. This is where I would like to reintroduce Diviani Chaudhuri's conceptualisation of *Zohra* as representative of a 'spatial crisis', wherein 'the crisis of the loss of national sovereignty and the crisis of women's demands of access and participation in the public space of the city' are piled on top of each other.<sup>66</sup> We see how the larger changes in women's performance of *sharafat* occurring in late colonial India get reflected in Zohra's own changing conceptions of appropriate gendered behaviour. The prose focuses on how her own intellectual and romantic ambitions are thwarted in favour of her role as a daughter, wife and mother in an *ashraf* Muslim family. I argue that this 'spatial crisis' also reflects the temporal crisis of (post)colonial modernity for the Indian Muslim woman—despite a progressive outlook, they become

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62. *Ibid.*, 10.

63. Hakimian Bua in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and Kareeman Bua in Khadija Mastur's *Aangan* (1962) are examples of this trope in other texts by Muslim women writers.

64. This has also been noted by Akhtar, who points out that the depiction of Unnie, 'the gendered subaltern', exists for 'the endorsement or affirmation of the status quo which favors and legitimizes' the exclusionary lifestyle of the elite *ashrafs*: Akhtar, 'Recasting the Outcast', 30. This depiction can be contrasted with the starkly more complex representation of the Dalit servant, Nandi, in *Sunlight*.

65. Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, 56–57.

66. Chaudhuri, 'House', 96.

destined to become an anachronism for their time.<sup>67</sup> However, this ostensibly private narrative functions as a vehicle for a discursive engagement with the cultural and political meanings of the Indian Muslim identity in the context of a swiftly decolonising and communalising nation.<sup>68</sup> ‘What can we do with these girls of today?... In our days, girls behaved like girls,’ says Unnie.<sup>69</sup> This tension of yesterday and today then does not just articulate femininity’s temporal registers, from Muslim girls of ‘our days’ to ‘today’s girls,’ but also becomes a powerful metaphor for the nascent project of determining Indian modernity and nation-building, simultaneously domesticating Muslim identity while also feminising Muslim political engagement. From education to religious observance to dress, Zohra gets marked out as ‘different’ but also malleable and in flux. There are several ways in which she is marked as the ‘new woman’ of her generation, chiefly expressed in her receiving education, coming out of *pardah*, and travelling outside the home.

Futehally documents Zohra’s entry into the mould of the ‘new woman’ through a sartorial shift, wherein after her wedding, Zohra begins to dress in a ‘modern style’—glittering jewellery, georgette saris and English style shoes. There is great discussion about different kinds of saris—‘mill’ and ‘khaddar’ or homespun—with the latter being associated with Gandhian activism. There are also references to Safia’s outings to the Ladies’/Zenana Club (perhaps a reference to the elite Lady Hydari Club patronised by the Ottoman princesses). The new furniture in her husband’s home is ‘western style,’ which makes it ‘disharmonious’ with the rest of the décor.<sup>70</sup> Futehally describes Zohra as ‘shy, troubled, and bewildered’ upon entering her marital home.<sup>71</sup> Spending time waiting on her mother-in-law makes her feel ‘acutely uncomfortable’ and ‘almost mute and always overdressed.’<sup>72</sup> Later on in the novel, after learning the art of make-up, Futehally describes Zohra as having the ‘appearance of a finished product, polished and sophisticated.’<sup>73</sup> Zohra entertains Bashir’s male friends and attends mixed gender political meetings. And yet, these experiences of so-called freedom do not give her any real sense of peace—as most of her responses range from discomfort and irritation to shame.

Against the expectation that Hyderabad women could effortlessly negotiate multiple cultural norms, *Zohra* seems to show the limits or failures of this cosmopolitan ideal as a path to freedom for women. Perhaps related to Futehally’s own experiences as the well-travelled wife of a diplomat, travel emerges as a markedly gendered theme in the novel as well—with Zohra travelling from Hyderabad to visit Mussoorie, Bombay (now Mumbai) and even taking a steamer to travel all around Europe. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Daniel Majchrowicz write about the uniquely politically charged undercurrent to the idea of travel by Muslim women in their introduction to a key edited volume on this subject: ‘...the very juxtaposition of these

67. Zehra Kazmi, ‘Golden Hour: Nostalgia and the Demise of the Muslim Urban Space in *Twilight in Delhi* and *Sunlight on a Broken Column*’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 58, no. 6 (2022): 839–53, DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2022.2083769](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2022.2083769).

68. For a fuller discussion on nationalism and *Zohra*, see Hai, ‘Adultery’, 335; Ahmed, ‘Brothers in Arms’, 439.

69. Futehally, *Zohra*, 1–2.

70. *Ibid.*, 58.

71. *Ibid.*, 57.

72. *Ibid.*, 62.

73. *Ibid.*, 222.



terms—Muslim, women, travel, mobility—instantly raises several questions. These may relate to practices of veiling, the need for male guardians, or perhaps restricted access to halal foods'. They add that even though these concerns are rooted in problematic tropes, these stereotypes also exist 'because the historical record about women's...mobility in these contexts is weak at best'.<sup>74</sup> In literary fiction centring Muslim women, these explorations of travel are even more rare, with proceedings generally revolving around the *zenana* or the domestic space. Thus, *Zohra* becomes an important fictional document of Muslim women's experience of mobility. On hearing Bashir's idea that he introduce Zohra at mixed-gender gatherings with his friends, his mother balks at the suggestion: 'young people have no modesty left'.<sup>75</sup> This disapproval is more widespread when, in keeping with his desire to 'modernise' Zohra and their marriage, Bashir plans a 'honeymoon' with his wife to Mussoorie, which the elders in the family see as an alien concept. The initial romantic bliss of their getaway is short-lived, as Zohra soon gets caught unaware by her own desire for Siraj, an acquaintance the couple makes during their trip. In the latter half of the novel, grieving over her separation from Hamid, Zohra visits Europe with Bashir. A notable moment is Bashir encouraging Zohra to drink alcohol abroad ('one of the niceties he would like her to acquire'),<sup>76</sup> to which she agrees to ease her grief. Futehally tells us that Zohra's 'old moral code' had been shaken in the aftermath of her experience of heartbreak.<sup>77</sup> Despite the initial culture shock, Zohra finds herself making friends quickly in the fashionable circles of Paris and London, but she realises they only view her as the exotic Other. Yet, the excitement of cross-cultural contact quickly disintegrates into feelings of envy, abjection and self-loathing, with Zohra feeling distinctly unsettled by her perceptions, both internally and externally. Futehally describes Zohra returning home from a party and looking upon her own reflection with 'mingled admiration and disgust', horrified at her own 'vanity'.<sup>78</sup> This is a precursor to her complicated feelings in the aftermath of the unwelcome advances by Jacques, with Zohra wondering if it was a mistake on her part to enjoy being looked at or choosing to dress provocatively. These plot points reveal that threats of sexual expression, violence and emotional upheaval can bring about unintended consequences for the *sharif* Muslim woman whose status as a travel companion to the male reformer signals their elite status.

As we can see, much of these ostensibly freeing examples of cultural and spatial mobility induce 'non-cathartic negative feelings'<sup>79</sup> in Zohra—she is described as being 'bewildered',<sup>80</sup> 'nauseous',<sup>81</sup> 'sick' and 'restless'<sup>82</sup> during these experiences. In relation to this movement, Chaudhuri writes:

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74. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Daniel Majchrowicz, 'Introduction: Muslim Women, Travel Writing and Cultures of Mobility', in *Three Centuries of Travel Writing by Muslim Women*, ed. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Daniel Majchrowicz and Sunil Sharma (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022): 1–48; 1.

75. Futehally, *Zohra*, 67.

76. *Ibid.*, 219.

77. *Ibid.*, 219.

78. *Ibid.*, 220.

79. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007): 6.

80. *Ibid.*, 89.

81. *Ibid.*, 90.

82. *Ibid.*, 226.

By essaying her protagonist's troubled negotiation of these alien and unsegregated spaces, Futehally represents secluded Muslim women's deep ambivalence at being thrust out of *pardah* into mixed company by their husbands after being reared in traditional households.... This destabilises the notion that women's agency is inextricably linked to visibility in the public space, and probes the inclinations of those elite Muslim women whose fathers or husbands were keen on bringing them out of *pardah* as an act of benevolent reform and modernisation.<sup>83</sup>

Undoubtedly, *Zohra* is an insightful account of the troubled relationship between agency and public visibility. To her credit, Futehally never advocates that for *Zohra* to feel fulfilled, she should have stayed at home as a *pardah*-abiding housewife. In fact, she makes the nuanced point that even though the process of coming out of *pardah* was a deeply unsettling and fundamentally patriarchal negotiation for *Zohra*, it is still a key step in her journey as a woman seeking to exercise her own agency. *Zohra's* emotional ambivalence about the currency placed on travel and mobility challenges the fantasy that an open Hyderabad cosmopolitanism, linked to the production of a modern *sharafat*, is necessarily liberating for women. A traumatised *Zohra* demands she return to Hyderabad after being sexually assaulted by Jacques, and while she does not disclose the assault to Bashir, he can sense something is wrong. Instead of soothing her, he angrily asks: 'The more freedom you have, the more restless you become. What do you want to do, *Zohra*?'<sup>84</sup> *Zohra* does not directly answer the question during the argument, but the moment still stands out. Even as the patriarchal reformer husband finally asks his wife what she wants, it is in a context and tone where she cannot bring herself to voice her true desires or even narrate her experience of assault to Bashir safely.

The novel's ending produces a 'narrative crisis' for the author, with *Zohra's* tragic death from the plague as she helps the poor and ailing of Hyderabad. This elevates *Zohra* to a symbol of self-sacrificing Muslim womanhood, allowing her to gain a moral upper hand despite her emotional adultery.<sup>85</sup> The question of *Zohra's* 'defiant empathising', as Vasudev calls it, or 'sentimentality', as per Mukherjee, or even 'pathetic' character construction, according to K.P.S. Menon, all signal the text as one being written in the mode of emotional persuasion and moral didacticism, thereby highlighting the fact that while Futehally undoes many notions of *sharafat*, she is undoubtedly still influenced by its textual and discursive strategies. *Zohra* provides us with an account of the deep ambivalence of the Muslim woman to the strategies of patriarchal reform, located within the specific context of Hyderabad Muslim cosmopolitanism and Indian nationalism. The spatio-temporal liminality of the modern, *sharif* Muslim woman who succumbs to the pressures and demands of *sharafat* is deftly explored in *Zohra*, whereby her journey becomes reflective of a broader ethical and political crisis that marks Indian Muslim identity and cultural expression. The late colonial context in which *sharafat* scripts its own unravelling allows us to analyse the minoritisation of Muslims as a community and the layers of difference that exist within the seemingly monolithic construction of the Indian Muslim. Placing Futehally in conversation with the works of other Muslim women

83. Chaudhuri, 'House', 5.

84. Futehally, *Zohra*, 226.

85. Hai, 'Adultery', 333.

writers would allow us to broaden the scope of such investigations beyond the canon of the North Indian Muslim cultural milieu to note the similarities and differences within the distinct regional configurations of South Asian Muslim identity. *Zohra* foregrounds the contradictory nature of gendered agency amongst Muslim women, proving that the path towards true feminist emancipation looks very different from the prevailing patriarchal imagination of progressivism and modernity.

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