"Bepardahgi" amid Social Taboo: Radical Acts of Narration in Bilquis Jehan Khan's Autobiography *A Song of Hyderabad* (2010)

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Abstract: This essay examines the crisis of subjectivity Bilquis Jehan Khan's autobiography *A Song of Hyderabad* (2010) both represents and creates, embedded in the act of representation/writing as well as unfolding through recollection/experience. To do so, I closely analyze two critical events in Bilquis' life – menstruation and the consummation of her marriage – which are striking in terms of the frankness with which she describes these events and the vividness with which she informs us about her confusion and bewilderment on both occasions. Drawing from Margot Badran's conception of autobiography as the "final unveiling," I argue that Bilquis' representation of these events in her life constitutes radical acts of "bepardahgi," in defiance of the norms of the society in which she was raised, which considered intimate subjective experiences taboo, to be shrouded in silence and euphemisms. In this regard, following Sidonie Smith and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, I show that these acts of narration involve performance on the part of the autobiographer and her multiple collaborators, and it in these choices and circumstances (when, where, and how to reveal what about the self and to whom) that the central tension of Bilquis' narration of her subjectivity lies.

Keywords: Autobiography, Hyderabad, pardah, menstruation, gendered self, gendered lives, social taboo.

Life-writing is a popular genre among Hyderabadi women who lived through the eventful decades of the mid-twentieth century.[1] One such account is Bilquis Jehan Khan's English-language autobiography *A Song of Hyderabad: Memories of a World Gone By* (2010).[2] It represents a life of great contrasts, for Bilquis was raised in a charmed world of unique privilege as the granddaughter of a top courtier from princely Hyderabad. She also lived through the tumultuous transfer of power in 1948, before migrating to Pakistan. At first describing her departure from Hyderabad as the collapse of her world, the young wife and mother grows to become a prominent social presence, an enthusiastic traveller, and a published author. New domestic and social realities and major political upheavals make exacting demands on Bilquis and force her to find new or hitherto unacknowledged resources within her self and interrogate, challenge, and modify her worldview.

A Song of Hyderabad took twenty-two years to get from concept to print and was written in collaboration with other people, who helped Bilquis Jehan Khan negotiate the challenging terrain of writing a book in English that would be accessible to Bilquis' grandchildren – to whom the book is dedicated – and who were raised in Pakistan, the USA, and the UK. Later, the desire to make this story known to a broader audience also called for the use of English. Indeed, Bilquis had never considered writing her autobiography in Urdu, her mother tongue.[3] She describes the collaborative writing process in detail in her acknowledgements, as does her daughter-in-law, Karen Longeteig, in a post-script. A large part of the book was co-written with Ruby and Sherry, two young Chinese women who came over regularly to Bilquis' house in Singapore, listened to her verbal account and

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wrote it down. Following this, the manuscript languished for years, during which Bilquis' husband Nasir made a few changes to it. Almost the entire family seems to have been involved in the final stages, as Karen retyped and reviewed the manuscript while Hasan, Bilquis' son, edited it, selected photographs from a family collection, and designed the layout with advice from his own daughter and others outside the family. A niece helped to verify some aspects of the author's family history and found some of the photographs. Therefore, this account appears to have had the support of the family, with everyone participating in the production of the text at one point or another.

What has further defined and textured this account definitively is the intervention of family friend Thalassa Ali, a British writer who has published nostalgic Orientalist novels of the British Raj. Bilquis attributes to her the final form and organization of her account. To Ali are also credited "corrections" and "improvements" to the author's English, even as she is acknowledged to have "retained the sense of my phrases and language, of my way of telling a story" (Acknowledgements, n.p.). Karen Longeteig's words give the reader a clearer understanding of how influential and transformative Ali's intervention was towards defining the final shape of the book. She writes: "Thalassa's contributions were vital; she reorganized the chapters and improved the flow of the story immensely, while retaining Bilquis' voice" (283).

In her now canonical essay "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance" (1995), Sidonie Smith has persuasively argued that autobiography is essentially performance of the self, so that subjects choose what stories to tell from their lives, what modes of narration, convention, and arrangement or organization to use in this telling, and before whom to tell this self. Her theorization has been embraced by scholars who work on autobiography among South Asian women, such as Sylvia Vatuk, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, and Anshu Malhotra. Throughout the long process of writing this account for her family and eventually preparing it for publication, Bilquis too would have engaged back and forth with her multiple collaborators – also her first readers – narrating and performing her self with them in mind, "not just as an imaginary act but as an embedded feature of the production process" (Lambert-Hurley 127). However, beyond the specific examples mentioned above, concrete instances of how collaboration shaped or changed Bilquis' account are not mentioned anywhere. So, it is difficult to identify and separate the contributions of different individuals with certainty.[4]

The resultant book was published by Oxford University Press, Pakistan, and is divided into two sections. The first is titled "Hyderabad," which charts not only Bilquis' life from her birth till the day she left Hyderabad for Pakistan but also the historical, social, and cultural context of the Hyderabadi world she inhabited, and which shaped her worldview in fundamental ways. By narrating her own story parallel to that of the history of princely Hyderabad and creating an "informal ethnography" of the aristocratic way of life (Lambert-Hurley 7), Bilquis gestures to her own and her family's place in Hyderabad as powerful members of the aristocracy, who relied on the patronage of the Nizam and belonged to the court. The second section – "Onwards" – is an account of her life in Pakistan and other locations as a wife, mother, social worker, and author. Of particular interest in this rich account is Bilquis' narration of her experiences of socially inscribed bodily experiences – menstruation and sexual consummation – and her contemporary response and retrospective reconstruction of these important events. It is the narrative performance of these events in Bilquis' autobiography that constitutes the primary focus of this essay.

This essay examines the crisis of subjectivity Bilquis' account both represents and creates, embedded in the act of representation/writing as well as unfolding through recollection/experience. Margot Badran has argued in her translation of Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi's memoir that the latter's act of writing about her haram life is the "final unveiling" and even her "final feminist act" (1). It is not my intention in this essay to reiterate what occasionally appears in Badran's conception to be a narrow binary equation of veiling with oppression and unveiling with emancipation.[5] Instead, I show the possibilities of what I suggest are radical acts of "bepardahgi" in Bilquis Jehan Khan's account.

Pardah refers to a highly codified culture of modesty specific to the Indian subcontinent, which consists of the physical segregation and supervised and restricted interactions between genders. It is also a "system of ideas and actions" (Papanek and Minault vii), manifesting in the figurative veiling of aspects of women's subjectivities. This includes, especially, women's language and acts of self-representation or performance, such as autobiography, as Lambert-Hurley has persuasively argued in her book *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* (2018). Moreover, pardah and associated practices of modesty are also connected to class-consciousness and the anxiety to maintain social boundaries, as Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault pointed out many years ago. More recently, Farzaneh Milani has made this point vividly in the case of Iran, pointing out that it is not only women's bodies but "[t]he concrete, the specific, and the personal also are veiled. Communication is veiled. Words and feelings are veiled" (xix).

Deeply felt and well-developed patriarchal anxieties about honour and shame are suffused throughout the practice of pardah. Violation of pardah is considered "bepardahgi," i.e. immodesty or even shamelessness. In the understanding of modesty as the need to veil women's bodies as well as their voices and other forms of articulation and expression, pardah is like practices elsewhere. It is in this regard that I mention Shaarawi's memoir, translated and introduced by Badran. In conjunction with Badran's positioning of Shaarawi's memoir, I will specifically examine the representation of subjective experiences – menarche and sexual consummation – in Bilquis Jehan Khan's account and argue that together, the mode in which this representation retrospectively occurs constitutes a radical act of "bepardahgi," performed in dissonance with the milieu in which Bilquis was born, raised, and trained.

In many ways, *A Song of Hyderabad* is what one would expect from an upper-class Hyderabadi woman. Rose-tinted memories of a feudal aristocratic past offer insights into elaborate customs and long-drawn celebrations and observances and represent Hyderabadi aristocrats as kind and benevolent landlords and masters. But it also departs in significant ways from that very norm. The remarkable representation of puberty and sexual consummation, which are still considered taboo subjects in many South Asian contexts, is a case in point. As important milestones in individual lives, they are often discussed by women in accounts of their lives. However, what is specifically fascinating about this text is the frankness and openness with which Bilquis discusses these experiences, how she felt versus how she was persuaded to feel, and how others reacted around her as these events unfolded. Her recollection is marked by her recognition of how she was kept in ignorance and how bewildering both occasions were. In retrospect, she seems to have understood the reasons why her elders kept her "innocent" about her body and its possibilities and, significantly, departed from this norm in raising her own children in a different world and another time.

It is evident that her first period is still vivid in Bilquis' mind decades after the fact and that she has had the opportunity to go over her memories and analyze them in the context in which she experienced this transformative event. She tries to be as accurate as possible. It is probable that the rich detail and analytical insights and depth she provides come not only as a result of age and time to process the experience but are also drawn out by the process of osmosis that decades of writing, narrating, correcting, editing, and discussing her life with her collaborators would have entailed. The initial audience for the book – Bilquis' grandchildren (four granddaughters and one grandson) – for whom it was, after all, intended, would also have been in her mind as she narrated and edited her work. They were raised in both a different time as well as different socio-cultural and geographical contexts than she had been, and so would have needed the essential context she provides to help them appreciate her experience from her perspective.[6]

Bilquis writes how, on a Sunday morning at the age of twelve or thirteen, when she was "very naïve," she discovered a red stain on her paijama and "had no idea what it was" (97). As a young girl from an aristocratic family, she was kept under strict control and surveillance by the two nursemaids assigned by her grandmother, who "never allowed me to go anywhere by myself, including the bathroom" (98). All she was told was that she had "reached womanhood," although she had no idea

what this abstract idea meant. Ironically, the whole house understood the symbolic and socio-cultural import of this event to their time and place, and grand celebrations and ceremonies took place to mark the occasion. Bilquis was made to wear festive clothes, and her room was beautifully decorated. Her grandfather's elite Arab guards gave her a seven-gun salute. Musicians played shehnai, and hijras danced and sang at this auspicious occasion. A grand dinner was organized with entertainment by mirasans. The young girl was pampered and dressed up for the event. What is fascinating here is that the onset of menstruation is a celebrated and acknowledged event, an occasion for great public rejoicing, while the subject herself is kept utterly ignorant about this crucial bodily change and what it means for her.

How this cycle of ignorance would then be perpetuated in highly codified, conservative, and patriarchal cultures can be seen in the fact that Bilquis, in turn, was not allowed to tell her younger, curious cousins about the reason for this grand celebration in her honour. "The subject remained taboo to the uninitiated" (99), she informs us, by a society that believed in keeping girls "innocent" until married. And even to the initiated, only information deemed necessary (to the preservation of honour) was given, such as the fact that she would menstruate every month and that she could not go anywhere without her grandmother's permission. Specifically, visits to the courts of the Nizam and his sons were now forbidden, no doubt for fear of the possibility of sexual attention and pregnancy out of wedlock, which would be a scandal that she would never be able to live down. This is where the information stopped, and Bilquis notes that she was upset because she had not been told and could not see the connection between her periods and going out and meeting people.

An older Bilquis is at pains to rationalize these actions, informing us that

> I only realized much later that my grandparents were trying to protect me from dangers, real or those of gossip. Society was protective towards women, [*sic*] while the real dangers may not have been great, the damage resulting from a bad or 'fast', promiscuous, reputation could ruin the rest of a girl's life. (100)

She adds further that her grandparents had to be especially strict with her because she was popular in school and actively participated in school events, because of which people knew her and were sending proposals of marriage for her (100). It is striking that a teenage girl having a public presence, or her name being known and occupying people's thoughts and attention was seen as something with potential for danger or threat to her reputation and, therefore, entire survival. The concept of pardah as demanding the silence and invisibility of women's subjectivity is useful here to understand how fragile the constructs of "honour" and "shame" are and how the anxiety associated with the need to constantly maintain them hinders the lives and possibilities of women.

In hindsight, Bilquis writes that she understands the wisdom behind the traditional remedies and practices that she was made to follow during her first period: it was believed that menstruating girls needed these. She even recommends them for other young girls when they have their first period (99). Furthermore, she notes that there were privileges that were associated with reaching puberty, and this included being involved in "family decisions" (102), such as viewing and selecting brides for male relatives and representing their qualities to the prospective grooms. However, it is significant that these privileges too came with restrictions for single girls and women, for it was only when she was married that she was properly included in the circle of women across generations who gathered to gossip about the sordid tales of unhappy couples and sexually unfulfilled women at court. Bilquis mentions how "[i]t was definitely not the done thing in Hyderabad to discuss court life in the presence of young people – especially young girls. Because of this, as a child living with my grandmother, I knew nothing of what went on" (77). She tries to demystify this enforced ignorance about sex in some way, in the process attempting to make sense of her life for herself and for the audiences for whom this book is meant. She also hastens to dignify her grandmother's intentions in narrating these scandalous tales, for we are informed that "Amma Jan's intention in relating these incidents was, I am sure, both cautionary and uplifting. She meant me to learn lessons from the lives she described" (84).

Bilquis would go on to marry at seventeen her young tutor, who had confessed to being in love with her and to whom she too was attracted. But just as she had no knowledge about her period, she had no say and no information about her wedding. Nobody told her why she had to get married immediately after school one fine day, and it was only later that she realized that it was because of Nasir's professional commitments that this was necessary (108). During this hasty wedding, Bilquis experiences many firsts that amount to self-discovery, such as wearing makeup, about which she writes that she was "surprised to see how different I looked" (110). But the most momentous experience was learning who her true biological parents were, and that she had, in fact, been adopted by the grandparents she had always been told were her parents. Furthermore, even at this critical juncture, no one thinks to inform her directly, and it is when the nikah contract is being read out and her parents are mentioned in the mandatory clause that identifies her as their daughter that she realizes who they are. However, the fact that the family had never bothered to explain this point to her suggests not that it was some sort of taboo but that it was only seen as a technicality in a large, tight-knit family and society where children were often raised by other-mothers.[7]

Other new experiences and challenges – that Bilquis is yet again expected to take into her stride – include her in-laws' considerably different lifestyle from that of her own family. Throughout the wedding, Bilquis' Scottish mother-in-law Margaret insists on western practices that are seen by Bilquis' Hyderabadi family as violating the norms of seemliness and even pardah. From insisting that the bride and groom should sit together and that her son would put a ring on Bilquis' finger to asking that the bride be allowed to visit the groom's family before her rukhsati or departure from her natal world, Margaret demonstrates the different culture she comes from and the contrasting norms of Nasir's Scottish-Hyderabadi family. These were unusual things in Hyderabad and would have certainly felt strange and shocking to Bilquis as well. Having been raised in a pardah environment, now she had to both adapt to life outside pardah – which was becoming more and more common – and navigate the conventions of a culture totally at variance with her own. Her husband's and in-laws' liberal views and ideas about many things would have been unexpected and even, it is suggested, disorienting, but she is expected to accept these and has no say in them.[8]

In line with a practice that was quite common when brides were very young and/or their husbands had yet to "settle down" in their careers, Bilquis married Nasir but did not leave her family home immediately to live with her husband. In this intervening period between nikah and rukhsati, interactions between a wife and a husband are strictly monitored to prevent any sexual contact that could besmirch the name of the bride and her family. However, yet again Nasir's family has a different outlook, and Margaret's request that Bilquis should visit them every week and meet Nasir under his parents' supervision is received with consternation by Bilquis' grandmother. But she is made to give in, as a result of which Bilquis has experiences that are unprecedented for someone like her and has to learn to deal with them. On one such occasion, on a picnic, Nasir asks his mother's permission – ironically! – to kiss Bilquis. Veiling her modesty even in her recollections, she tells us only that she felt very embarrassed when he kissed her (112).[9]

She writes more openly about the consummation of her marriage to Nasir. After the festivities and rituals marking her arrival in her husband's home are over, Bilquis finds herself in the bridal room, which was beautifully decorated by Margaret and contained all kinds of conveniences that she had never seen before, leading her to remark that "[t]he whole room appeared to me like a fairyland. I had never seen the like of it" (114). But the joy and wonder were short-lived, and she writes that she was frightened at the thought of being alone with Nasir (114). Seeing her confusion and fright, Nasir provides some clarity by "very gently explain[ing] to me that I was now his legally wedded wife and no one would object to my being alone with him" (114). He is understanding and patient with her and tries to draw her out of her inhibitions and encourages her to relax because it had been a long day. To ensure that she is comfortable, he suggests that she wear his sleeping suit because her own clothes had not yet arrived from her natal home. She recalls how he asked her to admire him dressed

as a bridegroom because she had been sitting with her head lowered and eyes shut in the bridal attitude expected of her in Hyderabadi culture. She also confides to the reader that Nasir gave her a ring of pink topaz and pearls that night (114-5).

In line with traditional Hyderabadi culture, where sex and consummation have social and political significance for family, society, and community, overriding modern notions of privacy for the newly wedded couple, Bilquis' grandmother had sent a maid to sit outside the bridal suite and report back to her about whether the marriage was consummated or not. But her mother-in-law gives the maid food and bedding and locks her up inside the music room! (115) It is well, perhaps, that the poor maid was locked up, for she may have found the proceedings of that night and the following day disturbing. Bilquis writes:

> The first night I was in a daze. I could not comprehend what was happening and I just passed out. The next morning when I woke up, my head was on my father-in-law's lap and the bed sheet was stained. My mother-in-law changed the bed sheet and washed it herself, so that nobody came to know anything that morning. The only thing I remember is that I was in great pain, and my mother-in-law helped me to wash and dress, and then took me out onto the verandah for breakfast. (115)

In this narration of the touching compassion and discretion of her caring in-laws, Nasir is notably absent. Bilquis studiously avoids mentioning him. This silence is not beyond comprehension. Despite this unpleasant start, Bilquis and Nasir go on to enjoy a long, fulfilling, and happy marriage. It is probably this sense of loyalty and attendant propriety that is involved in her careful and conspicuous skirting of any mention of her husband. As Sylvia Vatuk has noted in her remarkable, long-term work on the memoir of Zakira Ghouse:

> Every writer of an autobiographical work has to consider the possibility that family members or others may react badly to what she has written about herself, about them, or about events at which they were present and may remember differently from the way she has represented them. This is a particular concern for one who intends to *publish* her life story. But it is a consideration too for an author who is writing only for her own close relatives—as in this case—or even for her eyes alone, since she cannot ensure that others may not later discover its existence and be distressed by its contents. Therefore, most autobiographers find themselves either indulging in a certain amount of self-censorship or simply deciding to let the chips fall where they may, knowing that some of their most intimate relationships may be ruptured as a result. (Vatuk, "A Passion for Reading," 36)

In Bilquis' account, her loved ones have either been shown in an especially tender light or been conscientiously excluded to circumvent the scrutiny of her multiple audiences, while centring on her own experience and memory of this event. The narration reconstructs this consummation as if it is about her and her alone, allowing us to mull over an experience that was almost always shrouded in the silences of a conservative society predicated on constructing women as either virgins or mothers, in both cases miraculously untouched by sex.

In this regard, it is vital to not only pay attention to whom Bilquis includes and excludes in her reconstruction but also to unpack the incident of her fainting. It is not clear whether this moment in the text describes a physical loss of consciousness that appears to have lasted most of the night or is a conceit meant to figuratively veil the explicit details of Bilquis' sexual experience. Are we not told because the author did not want us to know? Side-stepping the precise details, Bilquis chooses to focus instead on the strangeness, newness, and/or fright of this experience, informing us that she was "in a daze" and "could not comprehend what was happening." It is suggested by this phrasing that her recollections are dominated by this aspect of her experience, which she could not process at the time without the vocabulary or perspective to do so.

As if justifying the disturbing experience that follows and attempting to orient an alien reader to the time and place in which it occurred, Bilquis explains beforehand how she knew nothing about sex because it was considered "indelicate" (114) to discuss such things with girls.[10] She uses euphemistic language, such as "facts of life" and "such things" (114), to discuss sex, although her tone is matter-

of-fact and not demure. She also does not describe the sexual experience itself, as pointed out above. In fact, I argue that that is part of Bilquis' first sexual experience, i.e. it was indescribable. It was not something that she could comprehend, process, or explain at the time with her state of knowledge about sex or the body. But it was clearly something that stayed with her and which she thought was important enough to record in this way and pass down to her grandchildren – most of whom are young women – to perhaps show them the state of knowledge about sex and the body among sheltered young women of her generation and/or simply share with young women of another time what it meant to be a young woman at her time. An older, worldly-wise Bilquis was able to gauge how different that conservative world and time in Hyderabad was, compared to later life in Pakistan and, indeed, the other parts of the world to which she travelled and lived.

Despite the use of euphemisms, conceits, and deliberate omissions, Bilquis' narration of the consummation of her marriage is radical. It violates the taboo associated with sex and discussions of sex among the privileged upper- and middle-classes of both Hyderabadi and Muslim societies. Unlike the elders among whom she is raised, Bilquis does not find it worth concealing her experiences of menstruation and sex from her grandchildren or even the public audience to whom she ultimately told her story. Furthermore, while there is a coy hint towards the construct of virginity in the detail that the bedsheet was stained, the "proof" of her virginity and, therefore, "honour" is not the focus of the scene. What the reader takes away from her experience is not that the marriage was consummated or that the bride bled as she was expected to, but the pain and bewilderment of Bilquis' experience. The same is true of the experience of her first period, which leaves the reader with the overall impression of the state of confusion and ignorance in which she was – to her dissatisfaction – kept by her elders.

By narrating in this manner events that are usually meant to be kept under wraps by respectable women, an older, more confident and independent Bilquis demystifies them and violates the very norms of the pardah institution in which she had been raised. It is in this sense that, I argue, she performs acts of "bepardahgi," a word that is traditionally used to monitor and condemn violations of pardah norms. I reclaim it here to turn it on its head and denote the narrative and performative defiance of patriarchy by Bilquis Jehan Khan. Taboos not ever to be mentioned in any direct detail or denotation before men, to be discussed only among women – particular women – in whispers and gendered euphemisms are now shattered not only before her collaborators and her grandchildren but a public audience no less. In doing so, despite the restrictions and conventions in which she was schooled, Bilquis finds ways to convey a sense of her self. As Lambert Hurley has said, performance of the self is "to be negotiated, defined, and destabilized by primarily female authors moving beyond the 'crevices' formed by nationalist and reformist agendas to craft their own subjectivity" (*Elusive Lives* 19). Departing from the norm of the world in which she was brought up, Bilquis highlights a common theme in both the experiences I have studied above: the ignorance, confusion, and bewilderment of young women kept largely unaware of their bodies – which are inscribed with symbolic social and communal significance – take centre-stage in her narration.

Moreover, these are not the only instances in Bilquis' account where she illustrates how the Hyderabad in which she was raised (and whose existence and passing her book is meant to document) does not determine her, a modern Pakistani woman and, indeed, a cosmopolitan citizen of the world. This is a distinctly gendered account, which focuses on what it meant to be a woman in a world that places special restraints upon anyone gendered thus. Bilquis writes with sympathy, for example, about those of her Mahbubia schoolmates who were caught meeting their boyfriends and expelled. She writes that they did not do anything morally wrong and uses their example to show how strict the school was and how the girls were watched continuously (69–70). Her shift from princely Hyderabad to the new world she must learn to adapt to after migrating to Pakistan is visible too in the way she brings up her children without submitting obediently to the ideas and milieu she was raised in and transferring them on to them. She subverts and unlearns that world in many ways.

She describes how she wanted to bring up her children "in a more modern way than the one used when I was a child" (191), giving them more agency, freedom, and opportunities. She informs them that "a mother is a child's best friend" (193). She also notes how her daughter and her friends acquired poise and confidence because of their lessons in Bharatanatyam, and remarks: "[w]hen I was a child we would never have dreamed of dancing in public!" (193) This new, bolder form of parenting included allowing mixed gatherings under supervision and pushing her children to go out and see how the less privileged live and negotiate life (211) to understand that "there was no difference between human beings: it was a matter of opportunity and environment" (211). Probably, she knew and understood that her children – especially her daughter Nayyar – were growing up in a very different world from hers. She wanted Nayyar's path in life to be easier than her own negotiations had been after she entered the world as a married woman.

This is not to say that Bilquis breaks rank completely. As mentioned above, she protects people she loves and avoids showing them in a negative light. Moreover, despite her finding ways to construct her subjectivity on her own terms, she does adhere to the norms of her culture and society. For instance, for all the sympathy she expresses for her Mahbubia schoolmates, she discusses the question of boys with a teenage Nayyar, explaining to her that "if one saw a beautiful rose, one would admire it, but if everyone wanted to snatch it, the petals would break" (212). She warns Nayyar not to be taken in by the "boys' sweet talk" (212). She also prevents her from roaming around alone and becoming the subject of neighbourhood gossip in Karachi. Finally, Bilquis stresses to Karen – her future American daughter-in-law – that her wedding to Hasan should be according to Islamic law and that it was important to her that any children from this marriage would be raised as Muslims (244-5).

This is also part of the gendering of this account, and Bilquis is constantly mindful of the limits and restraints that go into making good, morally upright, respectable Muslim women. Even as she shatters integral taboos of the society and culture to which she belonged, at no point does she depart from these essentials. Bilquis Jehan Khan had belonged to the upper echelons of political and social power in princely Hyderabad. Her account, however, is part of a larger project among upper-class autobiographers to dismantle a reputation of decadence and excess to claim sharif notions of propriety and consign the glittering aristocratic past to a realm of nostalgia and romance (Lambert-Hurley 94; cf. Pernau 39). Rebuilding her life in Pakistan after Partition, Bilquis relied on decidedly middle-class codes of sharafat to root deeply both her social standing as well as her own sense of belonging.[11] Lambert-Hurley has stressed the importance of geography in the construction of autobiography. In this regard, we must be conscious of the turns, as Bilquis writes, her life had taken (xv), through princely Hyderabad, post-Partition Pakistan, the UK, the USA, Singapore, Kuwait, Malaysia, and the other places she and her intended audiences and collaborators have lived in and belong to.

The impact of Bilquis Jehan Khan's formative and immersive early years in the princely Hyderabadi milieu can be seen in her total dependence on the social capital that she relied on as a privileged part of that world, so that she declares that she felt as if her world had collapsed when she was told that Nasir wanted to move to Pakistan after 1948. This period was one of deep personal crisis, as Bilquis is separated from her entire support network to embark on a new life away from everyone she loves. Significantly, it was the transfer of power in Hyderabad in 1948 and the shifts it marked in both culture and locus of power that compelled the young couple to move away from Hyderabad in the first place. It is tempting to superimpose Bilquis' narration of the self onto the narration of the nation or that moment of critical rupture that violently inaugurated new beginnings, configurations, and alignments for both the political and the personal. The demands made on the young woman to set up a new life in a new country led to her discovering new aspects of her self, hitherto unplumbed resources that enabled her to turn from the world to which she was accustomed, to face the challenge of the world that was before her.

Discussing the work of feminist Hindi writer Archana Verma (1946-2019), Nivedita Menon points out that women's autobiographies have finally brought into the light the things that they have

only discussed in the privacy of their homes and courtyards, "utter[ing] the names of their intimate body parts and their bodily flows," in defiance of patriarchy, being faithless to patriarchy and, instead, faithful to "their sense of self" (135). This insight is valuable here because Bilquis Jehan Khan's autobiographical narration takes two events that have long been the subject of social and communal significance but have only been discussed in these terms. These discussions have never centred on the woman as an individual and her subjective experience in this context. The crisis of subjectivity in her account is precisely this, that it oscillates between her nostalgic narration of "a world gone by" and her moving "onwards," her ambivalence and critical break from that very world to unveil expression on subjects hitherto treated as taboos. Autobiography is particularly well suited to the narration of such intimate experiences, and her sense of belonging and assertions of identity through different categories of gender, religion, nationality, region seem not to have "undermine[d] a sense of self so much as frame[d] … [her] multiple and varied expressions of interiority" (Lambert-Hurley 24-5). It is in this context that Bilquis Jehan Khan's performance of subjectivity – her radical acts of "bepardahgi" – should be read.

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Notes

[1] Other prominent texts in this genre written in Hyderabad include *Bikhri Yaadein* (*Scattered Memories*; 2008), the remarkable Urdu-language autobiography of Jamalunnisa Baji (1912-2009), and the non-fiction essays (khaake and tanz-o-mizah) of Fatima Alam Ali (1923-2020) in *Yaadash Bakhaer* (*May God Preserve Them*; 1989). It also extends to English-language novels – thinly disguised autobiographies (Lambert-Hurley 40) – such as Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951) and Huma R. Kidwai's *The Hussaini Alam House* (2012); culinary memoirs, such as Doreen Hassan's *Saffron and Pearls* (2018); and auto/biographies, such as Bilkees Latif's *The Fragrance of Forgotten Years* (2009). Siobhan Lambert-Hurley has pointed out how certain geopolitical formations – such as princely states – offered particularly fertile ground for life-writing by Muslim women (22). Indeed, Bilquis' account must be seen as part of a tradition of women's life-writing in Urdu and English – Muslim or non-Muslim – from this milieu, although this is beyond the scope of the present essay.

[2] I choose the term autobiography in agreement with a call by Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (2015) to reclaim it from the masculine western canon, with whose expressions of sovereign, singular consciousness it has long been exclusively associated. Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley expand the capacity of this term to include texts and contexts that were previously excluded and othered, deploying this more robust, inclusive redefinition to refer "to a diversity of forms, subjects, and expressions from the Mughal period to the regional courts of the eighteenth century, from the high colonial period into Independence" (7). Their formulation is in line with the ways in which women practitioners have negotiated, stretched, and ruptured the standard boundaries of the genre.

[3] Hasanuddin Khan and Karen Longeteig, in conversation with author, 31 July 2021.

[4] Fleeting hints of different registers of English, for example, are arguably suggestive of the many hands through which the text has passed. One aspect of rewritings and revisions by multiple editors is that the account has a "finished," "polished," and "complete" texture to it, although fragmentation is also seen, particularly in the second part of the account. Editing by different people, some quite distant from the milieu and modes of signification in the subcontinent, shows in some other interesting ways. Given that there is a detailed glossary, Urdu and Persian words and phrases have been unevenly translated in the body of the text, but when they are, the interventions of Bilquis' Anglophone collaborators create strange incongruities. "Takhallus," for example, has been translated as "nom de plume" (159), which is alien and fails to capture the

technical role of this word and concept in poetry. The specificity of the word is lost and confused with the introduction of a concept from a third culture, i.e. French or Francophone.

[5] Nor is it my intention to smooth over the vast diversities of practices in veiling and seclusion across Muslim cultures and communities located all over the world.

[6] This is certainly visible, for example, in the interpretations she provides for intricate aspects of pardah practice. The same goes for colonial concepts, such as "bed-tea" (31), which would now be new to younger generations of South Asians as well as their west-based diasporic relations. This would apply too to the larger audience of Bilquis' account, both her collaborators and the public readerships for whom this book was finally published.

[7] I borrow the concept of "other-mothering" from the way it is used in black communities in the USA, i.e. to refer to the shared care of children by many women within an extended family or community, because it resonates with the way children were and are often raised in the Indian subcontinent. See Wane (2000); Collins (1994); Jenkins (1998); and hooks (2008) for more. Yet, despite the unique devotion of her grand-parents, there is a sense of injury on Bilquis' part and an appreciation of what a momentous truth had been kept from her all these years. She writes of her uncles: "I grew up among those boys entirely unaware that I was not their sister. None of them told me the truth. The whole family kept a conspiracy of silence" (21). While these were common and widely accepted practices, history is strewn with examples of such arrange-ments that were traumatic to the mothers and possibly also the children. A fictional representation of this difficult predicament can be seen in Futehally's novel *Zohra*, where the protagonist has to deal with the traumatic possibility that she may have to give her son to her sister-in-law, who has no children of her own.

[8] This would go on to include her first pregnancy, which is practically supervised by her mother-in-law, who decides that Bilquis will not stay with her natal family during her pregnancy and childbirth (as per Hyderabadi custom) but will remain with her husband and his family and be cared for by Margaret herself as well as a team of doctors. When the baby is born, he is looked after by Margaret, so that Bilquis writes: "I sometimes did not even feel I had become a mother" (129). Her father-in-law played a role in educating her along western lines, tapping her hands with a long stick across the dining table when she made mistakes with the unfamiliar cutlery she now had to learn to use, and so she began to pretend she was not hungry and ate less (127). However, Bilquis becomes very close to her loving in-laws and is grateful for the support they provide, which enables her to do other things, such as travel or undertake social work. She emphatically informs us that she loved them and that they cared for her as if she were their own child. In fact, she writes that her mother-in-law was her best friend (117), "my guide and mentor" (253), and that her father-in-law "became a real friend" to her (127) and made her feel that he was proud of her (128).

[9] These picnics in places that were outside Hyderabad city proper constituted an unprecedented mode of interaction with the outdoors for an upper-class girl like Bilquis and would have been decidedly democratic and transgressive, owing to the possibility of rubbing shoulders with people from different genders and walks of life (112). When her rukhsati finally takes place, and she goes to live with her husband, Bilquis' exposure to a new way of life also includes enjoying the new kind of food her mother-in-law prepares and finding the sight of modern western furniture strange. She is also made to learn how to speak in English – which was the medium of communication in her new home – as well as adopt the social manners of privileged British society.

[10] Throughout this account, the narrator dwells on how "innocent" and uninformed upper-class Hyderabadi girls were about things such as flirting, courtship, and sex. She remembers, for example, how her grandmother disapproved of letting her stay with her grandfather at the residence of Prince Azam Jah, for fear that the little girl would see the parties with dancing girls and alcohol (8). Similarly, we are told that her grandmother herself did not know anything about the dancing girls that her thirty-five-year-old husband was accustomed to spending his time with when she had just married him as a young girl of fourteen. We are told that "[s]he had no idea about 'life' then, and didn't understand what was happening around her" (18).

[11] Middle-class constructions of sharafat or respectability, which Lambert-Hurley suggests are harnessed by Bilquis and other upper-class autobiographers, emphasized "achievement against birth, husbanding of resources against demonstrative consumption, the emphasis placed on the importance of education, and the turning towards reformist Islam with its accent on the scriptural sources against charismatic legitimation and popular syncretistic forms, on the value of personal piety against salvation through mediation and intercession" (Pernau 39). On a related note, for all that it is written in English, even the structure of Bilquis' autobiography places it firmly within the milieu of the Islamic Indo-Persian tradition of biography, which has a strong sense of history and is characterized by an extended and intricate engagement with lineage "in order that the subject's life may be given meaning within the context of his or her relationships to family and

teachers" (Lambert-Hurley *Elusive Lives* 116; Metcalf 127-8; see also Hermansen and Lawrence's striking analysis of characteristics of the tazkira tradition of biography). Like other texts in this tradition, Bilquis' account also demonstrates a topical or episodic arrangement and an emphasis on offering practical lessons for living a moral and righteous life.

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