

Ḥayāt-e Ashraf: Agency, Resistance, and Muslim Women's Life Writing in Colonial North India*

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Abstract: The compilation by Muḥammadi Begum (1877-1908) of Ashrafunnisa's life titled *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* (1904, *The Life of Ashrafunnisa*) is one of the earliest biographies of an ordinary Indian Muslim woman. This biographical account includes Muḥammadi's version of Ashrafunnisa's life, the articles and letters written by Ashrafunnisa herself, and other women. The article in which Ashrafunnisa (1840-1903) recorded the difficulties she encountered in learning to read and write in a patriarchal society was originally published in two instalments on March 23 and 30, 1899 in *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān* and was subsequently included in *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*. The publication of this autobiographical narrative in the women's magazine edited by Muḥammadi marks the inception of a feminist consciousness on Urdu literary scene in early twentieth-century North India. Since Muḥammadi was the first Muslim woman to edit an Urdu journal, her consequent decision to compile the life of a working woman points to what was common in their life. Muḥammadi's entry into the male dominated field of Urdu literature and Ashrafunnisa's appointment to the post of a teacher in a semi-government girls' school announced the triumphant arrival of *ashraf* Muslim women in the public sphere. This biography was compiled after Ashrafunnisa's death in 1903 as a tribute to the extraordinary life of an ordinary Muslim woman and reads like a female bildungsroman in Urdu. This paper investigates the dilemma faced by Ashrafunnisa after her widowhood and her negotiations with the contending demands of respectability and financial constraints. The intertwining of Ashrafunnisa's life with the growth of the educational institution she served in this biography challenged the nineteenth-century reformist discourse on domesticity that confined women to the household. My analysis of *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* seeks to demonstrate that Indian women in the nineteenth-century contested the reformist discourse on womanhood and were actively engaged in recasting themselves.

Keywords: Indian Muslim women, women's biography in Urdu, Indian Muslim reformers, *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān*, colonial educational institutions, job opportunities for women, early twentieth-century India.

Gender, Genre, and Print Culture

The proliferation of lithographic presses in late-nineteenth century North India enabled the transformation of the old genres and the growth of the new. The immense literary possibilities created by the print revolution in North India also modified the traditional Urdu genres such as *ṭabaqat* and *taẓkirah*.¹ The discussion of the development and spread of these genres to South Asia is beyond the scope of this paper. A transition from these traditional biographical genres to modern Urdu biography is detectable in *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (1880, *The Water of Life*) by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830-1910). In *Āb-e Ḥayāt*, Āzād touched upon the criticism of these anthologies offered by people who turned to English poetics after 1857: that these anthologies neither describe the biographical details, temperament, character and habits of a person, nor their strong and weak points, nor the relationship of an author with his contemporaries

(Āzād p. 55). Despite Āzād's awareness of the shortcomings of *taẓkirahs*, he is deeply immersed in this tradition (Pritchett 64). Because of the portraits of Urdu poets drawn in *Ab-e Ḥayāt*, it can be categorised as a transitional work between traditional biographical anthologies and the modern genre of biography in Urdu (Faṭīma 71). Aḥṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914) made a pioneering contribution to the art of modern biography in Urdu language with the publication of *Ḥayāt-e Sa'dī* (The Life of Sa'dī, 1881), *Yādgar-e Ghālib* (The Memoir of Ghālib, 1897), and *Ḥayāt-e Jāved* (The Life of Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān 1901). These works are pronounced a milestone in the development of this genre (Faṭīma 87) Ḥālī utilised biography to spread awakening, reform, and the idea of progress among Muslims. He penned the life of Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān (1817–1898) to fulfil precisely this purpose. The author of *Ḥayāt-e Jāved* thought of writing it after the establishment of Aligarh College and the Urdu journal, *Tahzīb-al Aḳhlāq* by Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān (Ḥālī 23). It pays a glowing tribute to Syed Aḥmad's monumental contributions to the upliftment of Muslim community in North India.

However, the new genre of Urdu biography did not remain confined to the commemoration of the literary feats and extraordinary deeds of Muslim men. Muḥammadi Begum (1877–1908) appropriated the newly emergent genre of Urdu biography to commemorate the life of a Muslim widow, Ashrafunnisa, also known as Bibi Ashraf. If a section of *Ḥayāt-e Jāved* listed Syed Aḥmad's achievements as the founder of the Aligarh College, Muḥammadi's *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* (1904) asserted the centrality of Ashrafunnisa to the growth of a semi-government primary school. Hālī's biography served to lionise Syed Aḥmad, while Muḥammadi sought to expand the scope of this genre to publicise Ashrafunnisa's pioneering work in the field of women's education. If Syed's life was held up as an example for Muslim community of North India to adapt to the changed economic and political circumstances of the twentieth-century, Muḥammadi sought to present the life of a working woman as an inspiring role model for Indian Muslim women. The title echoes both the name of the protagonist and the eminence of Ashrafunnisa as a school teacher. What brings Muḥammadi Begum and Ashrafunnisa together is their status as professionals. The compilation of this biography by the editor of *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* is not only an attempt at gendering the genre of biography in Urdu but also to attach respectability to women's entry into public service. In *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*, Muḥammadi Begum raised a biographical memorial to Ashrafunnisa's achievements, drawing on the eulogistic language of biographies composed by her contemporaries.

Muḥammadi Begum and *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*

Muḥammadi Begum was the daughter of Syed Aḥmad Shafī, who rose to the position of Extra Assistant Commissioner in the Punjab government in the nineteenth-century (Begum, *A Most Noble Life* 109). She was married to a Muslim reformer Mumtāz 'Alī (1860–1935), who penned a tract on women's rights in Islam titled *Ḥuqūq-e Nisvān* (Women's Rights, 1898). In partnership with her husband, Muḥammadi founded the Urdu journal *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* in Lahore in 1898. At a young age of twenty, Muḥammadi achieved the distinction of being the first woman editor of an Urdu weekly magazine for women. Even though Syed Aḥmad suggested the name of the journal (which echoed the title of his own prestigious paper *Tahzīb-al Aḳhlāq*), he advised Mumtāz 'Alī not to start it ('Alī 425). *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* was a product of the wave of periodical literature directed at women readers in the 1880s and 1890s: *Rafīq-e Nisvān* (A Woman's Friend, 1884), *Aḳhbār-un Nisā* (The Journal for Women, 1884), and *Sharīf Bibiyān* (Respectable Women, 1893). Mumtāz as the founder of the prestigious publication house "Dār ul-ishā'at Punjāb" in Lahore exploited the technology of print for advocating women's rights (Ṭāhir 27). Though *Tahzīb* was originally conceived of as a magazine devoted to the publication of women's articles, men's contributions were also accepted after the establishment of the paper. By printing national and international news, the magazine sought to expand the world

of women beyond the narrow confines of domesticity. Muḥammadi's exercise of full editorial authority over the selection of articles encouraged women to send their contributions for the journal (Minault 113). From 1898 till her death in 1908, her journalistic skill and intellectual calibre made *Tahzīb* an organ of women's voices.

Ḥayāt-e Ashraf is an alternative representation of the life of a Muslim woman, whose economic independence and determination is held up for emulation. The life of a widow who earned her livelihood as a teacher and headmistress served as a role model for the editor of *Tahzīb*, who was buried next to her grave as per her wish. Ashrafunnisa's contribution of poems and essays to *Tahzīb* was a violation of the promise she made to her uncle of never writing to any married man or woman in her life, an exception that is a measure of their true friendship (Begum *Majmua'* 193). The article in which Ashrafunnisa penned the obstacles she faced in learning to read and write in a patriarchal society was originally published in two instalments on March 23 and 30, 1899 in *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*. Later this autobiographical piece was included in the biography Muḥammadi published as *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*. Their friendship was so deep that it also overcame the prejudices of sectarian divide between Shi'as and Sunnis rife at that time. Muḥammadi Begum was a Sunni, Ashrafunnisa was a Shi'a. *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* is an embodiment of their mutual affection and a feeling of sisterhood. Because of their origins in Syed families of Western Uttar Pradesh and as native speakers of Urdu in Lahore, the two professional women shared a deep bond.

Fictional Heroine and the Profession of Teaching

This account of the life of an Indian Muslim female teacher in the second half of the nineteenth-century can be discussed with reference to the fictional heroine created by a male novelist, Naẓīr Aḥmad (1830–1912). He included Muslim women within the programme of modern education launched by Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān by writing fictional works on this theme. His novel *Mirāt ul-'Arūs* (1869) has Asḡharī as its heroine who opens a *maktab* (school) for neighbourhood girls at her home and instructs them in the basics of housekeeping apart from reading and writing. Naẓīr's second novel *Banāt un-N'ash* (1872) is considered a sequel to *Mirāt* because it deals primarily with the syllabus of the school Asḡharī opened in the previous novel. The heroine's sister-in-law, Mahmūdā assists her in running the school. The novel is often described as a series of lectures on geography and other topics of general knowledge. The elucidation of such difficult subjects and various topics in the book as arithmetic, gravity, magnetism, astronomy, telescope, climate, geography, the speed of light, lightning and thunder serve the purpose of a suitable text-book for girls. The novelist uses the appeal of stories and anecdotes to make lessons more interesting. Moreover, the centrality of Husn Ārā's character to the plot of the novel does not reduce it to the status of a mere text-book. The reformation of this aristocratic girl is a tribute to Asḡharī's teaching skill and moral influence on her pupils. Asḡharī is presented as a model teacher in a novel that depicts Naẓīr's ideal of a girls' school. The character of Asḡharī as delineated in *Mirāt* and *Banāt* became a role model for generations of young Muslim girls in late nineteenth-century and inspired the first Urdu woman novelist Rashīdunnisā (Jālibī 1145). The portrayal of an efficient, intelligent, and dynamic heroine who towers above men around her had a profound influence on South Asian women. Inclusion of teaching as a prominent feature in the portrayal of an ideal wife must have created in the mind of young Muslim girls an aspiration for this profession. The literary portrayal of a fictional *ustani* (lady teacher) forged a new ideal Muslim woman. However, the establishment of a school in the courtyard of Asḡharī's home makes it easier for her to adhere to the demands of purdah, central to the definition of a *sharif* woman in nineteenth-century North India. Asḡharī's refusal to accept wages for teaching girls in her home is a marker of her *sharāfat*. Naẓīr's decision not to include remuneration in the literary representation of an Indian Muslim female teacher is indicative of the stigma attached to the concept of women's earning in her age. This reveals the elitism of the male reformist agenda

that created a discourse of womanhood with scant regard to the problems and dilemmas Indian Muslim women from the lower strata of society confronted. A contrast between the lived experience of a poor widow and the cloistered virtue of honour and exalted idea of respectability portrayed by male reformers is drawn in the following section.

Biography, Domesticity, and Gender Norms

Muḥammadi's project of reimagining the gender rules of orthodox Indian society is also visible in the imaginative works she composed. *Sharīf Beṭī* (A Noble Daughter, 1908) is the fictional narrative of a poor Muslim girl who adopts the profession of teaching to rise to prosperity. Setting up a school in her house to teach the girls of her neighbourhood, she uses the tool of education to announce the radical message of female economic independence (Begum *Sharīf Beṭī*). In both biographical and literary works, the editor of *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* destigmatised the concept of women's paid work (Khoja-Moolji 45). Muḥammadi's decision to edit the biography of a working woman was aimed at demonstrating the untenability of the gendered division of labour in the lower echelons of society. The biographer highlights a Muslim widow's negotiations with the conflicting demands of respectability and economic hardship to redefine the concept of *sharāfat* in the changed political scenario of colonial North India. The biographer dwells on the precarious condition of the widow and her struggles:

“In her economic precarity and state of helplessness, the widow was left with no means of sustenance but to rely on her skills in sewing and lacemaking. She endured this trial with patience and determination and utilised her skills to meet her expenses and led a respectable life.” (Begum *Majmua'* 174. My translation.)

However, Ashrafunnisa's incessant efforts prove to be insufficient to fulfil the basic needs of the family and she has to finally accept the offer of a teaching job (Begum *Majmua'* 180–81). By depicting economic compulsion in the biographical account of a widow's life, Muḥammadi exposed the elitist character of the reformist programme of Indian social reformers that focussed mainly on the reformation of household leaving unaddressed the question of women's economic self-sufficiency.

Though the element of economic precarity is shown as propelling her from the confines of home, the protagonist's refusal to marry again is also a declaration of her autonomy. Nineteenth-century male reformers' crusade against the disapproval of widow remarriage in Indian society was based on the centrality of marriage in women's life. The respectable life lived by Ashrafunnisa after the death of her husband is a symbol of self-reliance. That this proto-feminist consciousness is somewhat muted in this biography is symptomatic of the strict gender norms prevalent in Indian society in the first decade of the twentieth-century. There are many instances of this subversive impulse in the biography. Ashrafunnisa's imagined transgression of domestic boundaries is obvious in her account of the events of 1857 in the letter she writes to her father. While the letter of the brother of Ashrafunnisa's grandmother provided the news of the family members, her letter included the happenings of the Great rebellion. The comparison of her letters to a newspaper or a historical report points to the failure of domestic discourse to restrict her imagination to what is described as woman's proper sphere. The inclusion of incidents outside the confines of the household in her letters displays a propensity even in her adolescence to engage with the outside world.

Reformist Discourse, Colonial Educational Institutions, and New Opportunities for Indian Women

Ashrafunnisa belonged to those respectable Muslim families in the early nineteenth-century which moved to the ranks of a service gentry (Lal 173). Her father Syed Fataḥ Ḥusain chose the

profession of a lawyer and worked in Agra and Gwalior. Her husband, ʿĀlamdār Ḥusain, was the product of the British educational institutions that opened up new opportunities of service in the colonial system. He studied Arabic and Persian at the Delhi College, which was central to the efflorescence of learning in the capital of India. His career began with his appointment as a Deputy Inspector of Schools in the Jalandhar district of Punjab and culminated in his recruitment as the Assistant Professor of Arabic and Persian at Government College in Lahore in 1865. However, it was unimaginable for Indian Muslim girls to get entry into these centres of learning as the custom of sexual segregation contributed to the exclusion of 'respectable' women from the public sphere (Mujeeb 12). After the death of her husband, Ashrafunnisa's adherence to the norm of *sharāfat* was responsible for her rejection of the teaching job offered by W.R.M. Holroyd, the Director of Public Instruction in Punjab. She instead chose to eke out earning from the work of embroidery and stitching to supplement a very meagre income from her ancestral property. The meaning of '*hāth kā hunar*' in the text can be interpreted as the skills of embroidery and stitching that she learnt before and after her marriage mentioned in the section "*Miyān Bībī kā Bāhamī Maslā*" (The Relationship between Husband and Wife) (Begum *Majmua*' 172). Ashrafunnisa's decision to decline government job for safeguarding the honour of her clan is indicative of how a traditional code of modesty curtailed the already limited options of employment available to women in late nineteenth-century (Begum *Majmua*' 180). Whatever income she managed to generate out of these skills was insufficient to meet basic expenses. Muḥammadi takes pains to stress that Ashrafunnisa agreed to accept the appointment in 1878 after Ḳhwāja Ḥusain Pānīpatī's intervention and exhortations. The details of this episode show how delicately the biographer treated this complex issue. Ashrafunnisa steps out of the confines of home with strict adherence to purdah to avoid it being viewed as subversion of gender norms. The biographer's sensitivity to this subject is attributable to her own experience of working as the editor of women's magazine. The boundaries of work permissible to women are stretched to include a teaching assignment in a government educational institution.

However, the difference between a school set up within the precincts of home and women's educational institution is that the latter bestows upon its employees an identity based upon institutional affiliation and professional achievements (Sarkar 109-110). The ties formed by relationship with colleagues, pupils, and other professional women are the material of her biography. Ashrafunnisa was held in high esteem by the superintendents of the school and her name invariably figured in the annual prize distribution functions. Most female visitors from London and America, who were probably the wives of Christian missionaries, would come to meet her. Not only the school in which she taught but also all its branches were closed on receiving the news of her death. The public recognition bestowed upon her is displayed by a large crowd that gathered at the time of her funeral procession. The profusion of lament both inside and outside her house following her death was an acknowledgement of her status as an eminent Muslim woman.

Ashrafunnisa's improvement of the reputation of Victoria Girls School, Lahore and its upgradation to the level of a middle school under her watch shows an unwavering commitment to work. Her acceptance of the extra load of teaching work due to the expansion of syllabus after the upgradation of school is a display of professionalism. The fact that her pupils always received high marks in the subjects she taught is a testimony to the amelioration of the quality of instruction at Victoria Girls School. The seriousness with which she solved the problems of her students is narrated in an incident in which pupils' complaint against a palanquin-bearer is dismissed by a peon and is finally resolved by Ashrafunnisa's intervention (Begum *Majmua*' 198). Her centrality to the growth of a semi-government primary school illustrates the pioneering role she played in changing the society's perception of women's capabilities as institution builders.

The advocacy of women's education by Indian Muslim reformers was not envisaged as complementary to the aim of increasing employment opportunities for Indian women. For instance, in Naẓīr Aḥmad's Urdu novel *Mirāt ul-'Arūs* (1869), Aṣḡharī's literacy and her successful management of the household are shown as inextricably connected. Therefore, Ashrafunnisa's fight for and use of education as a tool to enter the public domain is her transcendence of the reformist agenda and not her confinement to it as contended by Partha Chatterjee in "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question":

"Indeed, the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from the fact that it was able to make the goal of cultural refinement through education a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject...It was a purpose which they [women] set for themselves in their personal lives as the object of their will; to achieve it was to achieve freedom." (Chatterjee, 323-24)

In Chatterjee's reading, women's educational enterprise is viewed as appropriated by a male reformist and nationalist agenda that deprived women of individuality and will. The underlying assumption in Chatterjee's analysis is the passivity of Indian women and their silent acquiescence to the male reformatory programmes.

Far from being the supine recipient of male corrective zeal, Indian women contested the reformist discourse on womanhood that sought to confine them to the household (Haris Qadeer and P.K. Yasser Arafath, 08-09). In the autobiographical section of *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*, Ashrafunnisa places herself at the subject position. Her narrative underlines the determination of an ordinary Muslim woman to overcome all hurdles in the pursuit of learning and a career. The posting of her father in a remote location and the death of her mother in early childhood deprives her of parental help. The expulsion of a widowed *ustani* from their home for her remarriage leaves the protagonist of *Ḥayāt* with no educational aid for widow remarriage remained a taboo despite Indian reformers' crusade against this social evil. Her uncle's disapproval of women's learning to write is reflective of strong strictures against it in elite Muslim society. Kaika'us Ibn Iskandar's *Qābūs Nāma* (1082), an advice book popular in the Islamic world, sought to restrict women's access to the art of writing. Nasiruddin Tusi's *Aḡhlāq-e Nāṣiri*, a thirteenth-century text that exercised a strong influence on South Asian Muslim elites, warned against the supposed dangers posed by women's learning of reading and writing (Naim 219-20). The persistence of this orthodoxy in mid nineteenth-century India is reflective of the insurmountable problems Ashrafunnisa encountered in her educational adventures. However, the traditions and customs of society could not circumscribe a young girl's spirit and she managed to transcend the limits of learning set by patriarchy. Since she had already memorised *mujre-salām* when her mother was alive, she decided to borrow these texts from her friends for copying so that she could herself figure out words in Urdu and learn to read.² However, copying these words on a piece of paper would have aroused the suspicion of her relatives as writing was strictly forbidden to Muslim girls. She devised a novel way to acquire the art of writing:

"It occurred to me to use the blacking of girdle as ink and copy text at noon when people would be enjoying their siesta. That is precisely what I did. Trust me. After collecting the blacking of the griddle, the lid of the clay water pots, and twigs from the broom, I went out on the roof pretending that I was going there for sleep. And with a great sense of excitement, I began to copy out words." (168 My translation)

The innovative ways she devised to learn a forbidden art is evidence of her resourcefulness and initiative. Ashrafunnisa's refusal to submit to the dictates of a conservative society is a statement of courage and determination. Battling innumerable obstacles in a patriarchal society, she acquired the mastery of language to become the author of her own destiny.

Muslim Women, Religion, and Agency

Ashrafunnisa's biographical sketch emphasises her strict observance of religious rituals. A detailed description is given of the obligatory and voluntary prayers she performs to explain her spiritual condition. She is conferred the status of *mustajāb-al-dā'vat*, the one whose prayers are answered (p. 188). She organises the religious gatherings of women in her house to commemorate the tragic martyrdom of Imam Ḥusain. Muḥammadi makes use of the language of religious devotion as an emotional register to transform Ashrafunnisa into a saintly figure. The portrayal of a working widow as a pious woman was aimed at dispelling any possibility of aspersions cast on a woman stepping out of the normative space of home. This emphasis on the religious aspect of Ashrafunnisa's life sought to garner societal acceptance for the concept of women's earning of livelihood. The biographical account also foregrounds Ashrafunnisa's adherence to the institution of purdah, a sign of *sharāfat* in late nineteenth-century Indian society. She not only ensured arrangement of veiling in classrooms but never left school until palanquins arrived to drop pupils. Her improvement of the reputation of Victoria Girls' School is measured by an increase in the number of palanquins employed to transport the daughters of *ashraf* families (Be-gum *Majmua'* 181). Muḥammadi's biography includes Ashrafunnisa's compliance with the rules of purdah to show that women's entry into public educational institutions does not compromise on practices most cherished by the elite sections of Indian society. This narrative also emphasises the simplicity of her life. That she was not drawn towards the delicacies of expensive dishes and fine clothes is presented as an important trait of her character. Her attire was in accordance with the traditional mode of living (*qadīm vaz'a*), her jewellery native, and her sandals Indian. As per the testimony of one of her students, she kept wearing *ārsī* for many years for religious reasons, a small ring worn in place of stone in a thumb-ring (pp. 185–86). A glowing tribute is paid to her housekeeping skill. This biographical account also includes sections on her benevolent attitude and acts of charity.

In "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", Partha Chatterjee argued that in the spiritual/material, the inner/outer, and the home/the world dichotomies created by the nationalist ideology in late nineteenth-century India, women were made the guardian of the spiritual quality of the national culture located in the home. However, this ideology permitted women to venture into the world outside domestic boundaries provided it did not jeopardise her 'femininity'. The flexibility of nationalist discourse is apparent in its redrawing of the boundaries of the home from the rigid and physical confinement of seclusion to a more adjustable domain constituted by the differences between socially acceptable male and female behaviour. After anchoring the essential 'femininity' of women in certain kind of 'spiritual' qualities, women were permitted entry in the public sphere. Once the 'spiritual' markers of her femininity were clearly defined with regard to her sartorial, culinary, and religious practices, she could "go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programmes, and in time even take up employment outside the home." These spiritual attributes of self-sacrifice and religiosity created conditions that ensured the protection of her femininity when she entered the world (Chatterjee 325–327).

Instead of interpreting Ashrafunnisa's strict observance of purdah as the spiritual attribute of nationalist ideology, it can be understood with reference to the changing identity of Muslim community in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial India. Social, political, and economic changes in that period contributed to a consolidation of Muslim community. The numerical strength of the community was emphasised to gain political advantages from the colonial regime, subordinating women's issues to the interests of the larger community. The communalization of Indian politics and Muslim separatism led to the emergence of a conservatist attitude within Indian Muslims with regard to certain customs and practices considered essential for preserving the cohesion of the community (Lateef 16–18, 80). Although Ashrafunnisa's

life appears to be governed by the strictures of patriarchal expectations, she does come across as a strong woman. It appears that her biographer took immense pain to mute her departures from established gender norms of her time, probably a strategy adopted by her as a means of negotiating with patriarchal pressures.

Portrayal of Women's Sufferings and the Nobility of Indian Women

A note of dirge pervades Ashrafunnisa's biographical account especially in the sections in which her mourning for the deaths of her mother, father, husband, daughters, and son are described. According to the testimony of one of her students, tears would roll down her cheeks even when she taught. The portrayal of the sufferings of Indian woman as an essential component of her nobility is related to the question of agency. The presence of the ingredients of sentimentality in this biography is somewhat similar to the consistent depiction by Rāshidul Ḳhairī (1868-1936) of the tragic fate of Indian women in his fiction, which earned him the title of *muṣavvir-e ḡham*. His early novels *Ḥayāt-e Ṣāleḡhā* (The Life of Ṣāleḡhā) and *Manāzil-us Sāirā* (Stages of Journey) were published between 1902 and 1905 (Minault 131). *Ḥayāt-e Ṣāleḡhā* is the tragic tale of a dutiful daughter Ṣāleḡhā, whose uncomplaining endurance of her step-mother's tortures and endless sufferings and death in an incompatible marriage present her as a victim of injustice. Ḳhairī's admiration for Indian women's patient endurance of calamities, the strength and nobility of their character are detectable in his oeuvre. His portrayal of the miseries of the gentle, noble, and pious Indian women verges on a glorification of their sufferings. There is an emphasis on their helplessness which is inextricably linked with his advocacy of the restoration of women's rights by men (Suhrawardy 86-90). However, the incessant laments of a widow in Muḡammadi's account are not aimed at foregrounding her powerlessness as was represented in the moving testimony of a dying widow and her miserable plight in Naṣīr Aḡmad's Urdu novel *Ayāmā* (1891). Neither does the catalogue of personal losses Ashrafunnisa copes with emphasise the transience of earthly existence and a consequent sense of resignation. By highlighting the tragic chapter of her life, this narrative technique stresses her resoluteness, resilience, and the spirit of perseverance.

Conclusion

Ashrafunnisa's auto/biography is an important text that documents the resistance put up by Muslim women in South Asia and their appropriation of education as a tool to battle the conditions that demanded capitulation. It is a story of a Muslim widow's negotiations with the contending demands of respectability and economic hardship. The spirit of perseverance and resoluteness that marks her rise to the position of a headteacher is a fit material for a female bildungsroman. Her transcendence of the reformist discourse on women's education is a prominent feature of this auto/biography. *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* expands the scope of biography to include Ashrafunnisa's contribution to the cause of women's education in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century North India. It is a biographical memorial raised for a working woman who became a model for the new generation of South Asian Muslim women.

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Notes

- ¹ *Tabaqat* is a genre of biographical literature that emerged in the period of early hadith criticism (eight-century AD) and included assessment of the personal, intellectual, and religious aspects of hadith transmitters. Hadith criticism deals primarily with the chain of hadith transmission in order to establish their authenticity. *Tazkirah* refers to a collection of biographical notes, memoirs or remembrances.
- ² *Mujre-salām*: Short benedictory poems that honour the Prophet Muḥammad and his family.

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