

Privileging Non-Conformity as Self-Articulation: A Reading of Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo*

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Abstract: This paper will read Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* (Coincidences), to explore the unique trajectory that her self-expression takes, and the negotiations with individualism and representativeness that this entails, given the hegemonic discursive presuppositions which exist about her identity as a Bengali Muslim. The representation of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora, has been marked by certain predetermined themes related to Islamic religious practices and veiling. Hashem, despite her diasporic location, and through the delineation of a childhood – which she has called fairly representative of her class – refuses to be appropriated by such discourses. The author has an independent voice – that is neither one of a victim nor of a reactionary – and this stands her in good stead in both critiquing gender oppression and espousing her identity as a Bengali Muslim. *Kaktaliyo*, then becomes a critique of the untenable idea of a monolithic perspective on Islam through the depiction of a life steeped in rationality, itinerancy and non-conformity, where religion is only one component of one's identity.

Keywords: Autobiography, shared syncretic culture of undivided Bengal, religious tolerance, itinerancy, memory

Dilara Hashem had called *Kaktaliyo* (Coincidences), an autobiographical novel, at the time of its publication in 1985, but later acknowledged it to be her autobiography when it was reprinted by the University Press Limited of Dhaka in 1999. While there is little or no difference between an autobiography and an autobiographical novel from a generic perspective (Lejeune 8), the prevalence of life-writing by women which focuses on childhood or privileges the social over the individual, makes this distinction a critical one as it lays bare the awareness of the limits of acceptability. Hashem, for instance, had wanted to keep herself under a shroud of "secrecy" despite writing about a non-contentious period of her life – her childhood (Hashem vii). Even in personal narratives, expected to be reflective upon "matriline within the social structure of patriline", (Gulati and Bagchi 10) one notices this concentration on the early years and a taboo about writing on sexuality, so much so that Maitreyee Chattopadhyay, writing about Bengali women's autobiographies in general, rued the lack of focus on intimacy and criticized the practice of "looking back at life from a comfortable distance – so that society and the world can call one a 'good girl'".¹

Whether it was the perceived politics of reception that determined Hashem's choice of the period for her autobiography is not clear, but she has spoken of the restricted space for self-articulation available to women in the male-dominated Bangladeshi literary establishment.² It needs to be noted here that following postmodern interventions in the understanding of selfhood, the subject no longer has a "unified core, hides no secret, discoverable true essence. In process, a site of dialogue with the world, others, memory, experience, and the unconscious, the subject is implicated in sinuous webs of intersubjectivity" (Smith 15). And yet, in deconstructing the subject thus, the aim was "to release the term into a future of multiple significations" and to "give it play as a site where unanticipated

meanings might come to bear" (Butler 15). In the case of women, however, only through releasing the "category" of women from a fixed referent that something like "agency" could become possible:

For if the term permits of a resignification, if the referent is not fixed, then possibilities for new configurations of the term become possible. In a sense, what women signify has been taken long for granted for too long, and what has been fixed as the 'referent' of the term has been "fixed," normalized, immobilized, paralyzed in positions of subordination. In effect, the signified has been conflated with the referent, whereby a set of meanings have been taken to inhere in the real nature of women themselves. To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorize or safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman [...]. (Butler 15-16)

In the absence of such reconfigurations, the question of what it means to be a woman in specific political and social systems, and how pushing those boundaries could lead to (mis) appropriation and "othering" in political discourses³ becomes evident from cases of self-censorship like Hashem's, as well as the acerbic reception of autobiographies that do not fit into the mould.⁴

At one level, *Kaktaliyo* is the story of Hashem's childhood corresponding to the first eight years of her life – but the preface and intermittent authorial interventions, allow for a more nuanced reading of the text, which is structured as a chronological linear narrative punctuated by critical interventions. The author has an independent voice: neither that of a victim nor of a reactionary, and this stands her in good stead in both critiquing gender oppression and espousing her identity as a Bengali Muslim. The representation of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora, has been marked by "persistent and deterministic themes and structures such as religion, 'arranged marriages' and the hijab and veiling" (Ahmad 45). Hashem, despite her diasporic location, and through the delineation of a childhood – which she has called fairly representative of her class – refuses to be appropriated by such "pathologized, victim-focused discourses" (Ahmad 54). *Kaktaliyo*, then becomes a critique of the untenable idea of a monolithic perspective on Islam through the depiction of a life steeped in rationality, itinerancy, and non-conformity, where religion is only one component of one's identity. In this paper, keeping in mind the theoretical perspectives discussed, I would like to read Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* to explore the unique trajectory that her self-expression takes, and the negotiations with individualism and representativeness that this entails.

Kaktaliyo focuses on the period from 1936 to 1944, and through the narrator Razia Rashid – Raju – Hashem writes about the defining experiences of her formative years. In this context, it would be interesting to note that the period in which she bases her writing – she is talking of British India and East Pakistan even while referring to the nation-state as Bangladesh. The idea of this nation gets carried over unproblematically across the tumultuous double reconfigurations of identity that it goes through – first as East Pakistan in 1947 and then as Bangladesh in 1971. In an interview given in 2011 she acknowledges the fact that politically there was no "Bangladesh" then, but in the book the reference is unproblematically to it.⁵

In undivided Bengal, her father was employed in the civil services during the British occupation of India and post 1947, worked in Pakistan's Jute Regulation. Hashem calls her family an ordinary one – similar to most families in Bangladesh. Her father was in a transferable job – was initially the sub-deputy magistrate and later on became the deputy magistrate in the British civil services. He was hardworking, interested in educating his children and conservative – like most middle-class fathers in Bangladesh. Her mother was of a loving nature, but under the pressures of running the household, could often be short-tempered. She took care of their eight children – what Hashem calls an *average* family – tried to save money, and would constantly worry about their future. However, they both had certain qualities that made them stand out from the crowd – straightforwardness, idealism, self-respect and stubbornness – which they passed on to their children in varying degrees.

Claims of commonality and representativeness – which mark the descriptions of the various characters, including herself – is Hashem's way of underlining her desire to remain inconspicuous even while

proclaiming her individuality: this is done by turning those very yardsticks on their head, by which an unflattering picture had been painted, in the first place. The tone for this as well as the oscillation between her childhood self and her adult persona which forms the text of *Kaktaliyo*, had been decided in the preface itself: also, while in the text, she consciously allows her adult voice to become muted, or at least take a back seat and privileges her childhood persona, here she gives it a free rein.

In the preface, she had begun by calling herself a donkey, the difficulty of which becomes even more amplified for Hashem, because of her gender. It, of course, is a way of paying herself an underhanded compliment, where lack of awareness or acceptance of social mores becomes a way of vindicating her stance, rather than being defined by them. Noting the silence of Bangladeshi women regarding the discrimination that comes their way, she emphasizes her uniqueness in speaking of the slights that have happened to her: this is attributed to the similarity that she has with a donkey. The preface is written as a monologue addressed to male readers and is an exposé of the male-dominated Bangladeshi literary establishment – where *good-looking* women writers like her – “akin to the bitter taste of whiskey” (xi) – were welcome as long as they could be patronized or exploited; the moment they started finding ground beneath their feet, separate yardsticks were invented to keep them apart, to judge them only in the context of other women writers.

It needs to be noted here that in the autobiographical narrative per se, Hashem does not speak of personal slights – in fact, she takes great pains to avoid being viewed as a victim. But in the preface, she does not spare anyone from her scathing censure. Hashem states that it is her obstinacy that led her to write her story the way she did. She had earlier mocked the male writers for using sexuality to sell their books, in the context of which her “raking mud” – the slights that she describes – would be disappointing (xiii); and now she criticises the Bangladeshi literary scene for its emphasis on surrealism. She believes that it is nothing more than a ploy to deceive the masses – this attempt “to quote Camus, Sartre and Brecht” in order to mask one’s reality (xv). She wants to speak of her *true* story, unlike the others. As she puts it,

[...] for everybody is not a stupid donkey like me, they know that if they clear up the mist around them and appear in a straightforward manner, that their real character will be revealed, which is why they use the surrealistic make-up to enter the literary arena.

But I have picked up the pen only to speak of my story in a very real, natural manner.

But do you know something? It is straightforward people like me who arouse everyone’s interest, as when people are unable to say things directly, there is fun in hearing those things from another’s mouth. Assured by that thought then, let me begin my story? (xv)

The preface thus sets the tone for the manner in which the adult consciousness would impinge on the reminiscences – it does not remain simply a recollection of childhood memories rather becomes an analysis of them and a way of correlating her adult personality with the kind of experiences that she had been privy to in her young days.

In *Kaktaliyo*, Hashem’s identity cannot be thought of in isolation; it is inextricably linked to the group of women that she aligns and conjoins herself with: her mothers and sisters. In the preface, however, she moves beyond familial ties to the larger idea of woman as a cultural construct: something she relates to and yet distances herself from, to develop her autobiographical persona. In this sense, she embodies the desire to alienate herself from “the historically imposed image of self” and “create an alternate self in the autobiographical act” (Friedman 76). As Susan Stanford Friedman had explained:

In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands women project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead this new identity merges the shared and the unique. In autobiography, specifically the text created in a woman’s text is often not a “teleological entity,” an isolate being utterly separate from all others, as Gusdorf and Olney define the autobiographical self. (76)

And it is in this space of intersubjectivity, that Hashem locates *Kaktaliyo*, revelling in and celebrating her identity as a woman but also carefully refraining from falling into the pitfalls of essentializing it.

In speaking of the limitations of life-writing, Sudhir Kakar had stated that, "I am as aware as the next person of the impossibility of self-portrayal, the unavoidable omissions and self-deceptions of an undertaking whose only commandment is that the narration of the memories of life should not do any real damage to one's feelings of self-worth" (3). Hashem's peculiar style of self-narration while being a testimony to this understanding, can also be traced back to the relationship that she had with her mother. On the one hand, she had immense respect for her mother, but on the other, she was usually at the receiving end of her mother's beatings, and perennially hungry for her approval. Hashem's mother was the offspring of a poor but brilliant school-inspector and an aristocrat's daughter: this mismatch in terms of social stature became a crucial feature in determining the direction that her life would take. Because of the difficulties that her grandmother had in adjusting to her grandfather's way of life and because of four more children who were born in close succession, Hashem's mother had been brought up not at her parents' place, but in Kolkata, in the mansion of her wealthy grandparents. Unfortunately, apart from religious education and Urdu, she had not been taught much else, in keeping with the trend in well-to-do Muslim families, and had been married off at the age of thirteen to a man fifteen years elder than her.

However, she takes pains to point out that the trajectory that her mother's life had taken was not the norm in the family. Her uncles were all highly educated, with one of them, going to Oxford University for higher studies. Even her *khala* – her mother's younger sister had done her graduation with distinction from Lady Brabourne College. This differential treatment did not bode well for her mother, especially since she had an intense desire to learn, evidenced in the fact that post-marriage she picked up both Bengali and English from her husband, and became proficient enough to write poetry in them.

Her mother, thus, comes across as a strong person with a mind of her own but also as someone battling her inner demons. Hashem has spoken of instances when her mother would disassociate herself from the household, would not find any pleasure in reading books or listening to music – would be depressed, and their daily routines would lose their "rhythm" (149). This phase would not last long, and she would eventually come back and re-immense herself in domesticity, but the frequency of these episodes was aggravated by her mother's sensitive nature, which she used to hide behind a hard and rigid exterior.

She says that she had realized this as an adult in retrospect, but even as a child she remembered her mother saying to her *khala*, on the eve of the latter's marriage that for a woman it was not enough to cook and give birth to children, it was equally important to pursue the talents that one had been born with, something that she had not been able to do (204). As Hashem states:

Probably because she was an artist at heart, the tiniest heartbreak, the minutest thing touched her, plagued her continually; the coarseness of the world outside never attracted her. With this kind of ability to feel, if she could have been immersed in creativity (the possibility of which was very much there in her), maybe then whatever pained her could have turned into a source of joy for her, but lack of opportunity and time did not allow that to materialise in her life. All her creative energies were utilised in giving birth to children, one after another, and in her efforts in raising them well. This is how she finished herself. (149)

This becomes all the more evident in the vehemence with which she reacts when Hashem's *Nani* – her maternal grandmother – proposes that Rosy, her eldest daughter be married off early – keeping in mind that she had six daughters and her husband did not earn well enough to provide them with sufficient dowries (163-164).

This is not to say that the picture that Dilara paints of her mother or for that matter of the relationship between her parents is entirely gloomy. Her father was a rational man, with great respect for education; he was kind, acted responsibly towards his wife and children and was concerned about their future but he could not be a part of the inner world of his wife, with her distinctive personality and a pronounced sense of style. So, while outwardly they seemed to be in harmony, in reality there was a

big gap that he, sadly, did not even realize. As Hashem puts it, “an extrovert and an introvert – Ma and Baba were like two different streams that flowed together side by side for their entire lives” (149).

This undercurrent of dissatisfaction had an unintended impact on Hashem’s psyche and could have been one of the reasons behind Hashem’s sense of distance from her mother as a child. She was the second daughter of her parents – who had to face social censure for bringing three daughters into the world in close succession. Their fourth and fifth offsprings were male – which mitigated the effect to some extent in the societal view, but right at the outset, Hashem had imagined the unconscious neglect that came her way, to be on account of this reason:

[...] giving birth to too many daughters had probably made my mother contemptuous of the entire process. [...] In solitude, she probably sat and wondered, ‘If I have another daughter after these three, what am I going to do – simply a beautiful daughter is not enough’. So, an unintended neglect had been the lot of the next two daughters. They had not consciously done it, and they probably did not even realize that compared to Rosy they had given less attention to Razia and Rehana or loved them any less. [...]

Because she was the youngest, Rehana still got some attention. But even though I was only eleven months and twenty-seven days old, I was elder than her. So everybody used to expect that I would be the understanding one, would take care of myself, and maybe even take care of Rehana. (6-7)

She does not specify the particular form that this slight takes though she portrays her parents conversing on this issue later in the autobiography (243). The only person who is shown directly criticising her mother regarding this is her *Nani*. While her parents were constantly encouraging them to become achievers – her mother used to speak of her daughters becoming Madame Curie, painters or writers, and her father had decided that without completing their post-graduate studies, none of them would get married (165-66) – but the manner in which she sought reassurances as a child, brings out the neglect that came her way.

This becomes especially more evident, in comparison with her sisters. Rosy, the eldest child of her parents had been born after the death of a son. She was the recipient of excessive love and care on account of that, as well as because she was beautiful, studious and responsible. Rehana, or Ruhi, her younger sister, was equally beautiful, if not more than Rosy: even though her birth had not been celebrated like Rosy’s she could attract everybody’s attention because of her brilliance, and her calm nature.

Hashem says she was not only mediocre in looks – she was darker compared to her sisters and did not have their sharp features – but also lacked their sharp intellect or memory. She was commonplace in every sense of the term and this factor affected the manner in which she viewed herself:

I had become very conscious about the way I looked from a very early age. The age at which girls become aware of their looks, I used to keep a broken mirror in my doll’s box much before that, and used to watch myself from multiple angles; make my hair in various styles so as to get more attention than my sisters [...]

In my childhood, since I considered myself ugly compared to my sisters, I used to try all kinds of things to draw the attention of others, to get recognition from them – this was my sole preoccupation. (18)

She not only tried to do everything that would give her importance, she says she also developed the desire to be the best (18). Thus, it is to this sense of inadequacy that she came to develop on account of her sensitive nature, the accident of birth which placed her between Rosy and Ruhi, and her complicated relationship with her mother – that she owes her defining traits – her desire to stand out and her attempt to blend in.

She had other qualities – she was good at sports, excelled at adventurous activities, was courageous and had strength of character. While her sisters, with their looks, intelligence and calm demeanours, fitted in with accepted notions of what *good girls* were supposed to be, she wanted to be appreciated for what she was, even while being a far cry from the conventional presuppositions. She brings out instances when she was praised by her grandfather for being a leader, having initiative (62), her

father for being adventurous and climbing up to the highest point of the Shushunia hills with him, despite having a wound on her head (41–42) – but these were one-off instances.

She was more often than not being criticised, especially by her *Nani* – who found fault with everything she thought or did. She scolds her for being ambitious – Hashem had spoken of her desire of being an artist (56) and for not being a quiet child (51) – but her grandmother's biggest grievance was that she was all that, despite being a girl from a poor family. Her *Nani* was contemptuous of Hashem's father for not earning enough, for producing six daughters, and for having the bad habit of doing charity: she could not speak of him without sneering. In the straightforward world of her immediate family, her grandmother's insinuations came as a surprise to her and she says that she did not know that her father was poor "even in her dreams"; it is only in her grandparents' house that she was made to realize that (55).

Despite these tensions and her own sense of inadequacy, Hashem remembers her childhood as a happy one and speaks about her eventual realization of the atypical expression of her mother's love. Her mother would be uncomfortable with anyone praising any of her children, for fear of them becoming brazen and complacent. However, since Hashem got scolded often, she believed it was her lot alone. This epiphany hits her on reminiscing about an incident involving her *Mejomamu* – her maternal uncle: she had been ill as a child and he had come to visit her. While he was praising her abilities to sketch faces and underlining the necessity of pursuing one's talents, her mother intervened by asking him not to give too much importance to her, lest she drive everyone crazy. She writes that while she was used to being scolded by her mother, at that moment, that statement had brought tears to her eyes:

Now I realize that was the nature of my mother's love. Making fun of minor errors of people close to her, was not in her eyes, demeaning them, rather, that was her way of giving them importance. Her children were like pieces of her heart. Even in her own case, she used to regret her mistakes and her shortcomings more than she celebrated her virtues. Probably, because she could not see her children separate from herself, rather than being proud of our achievements, she would die of shame at the smallest of our failures – real or perceived. [...] Probably, I have been infected by her chronic lack of satisfaction. (47)

Apart from the influence of the familial relations on her psyche, *Kaktaliyo* also brings to the fore the kind of religious education that she had, which led her to develop a strong distaste for religious fanaticism.⁶ She had been brought up in a household where she had been given the necessary religious instructions – she speaks of her mother's strictness in Quran lessons every morning – but her father had also spoken of the importance of understanding that every religion had its own value when she had enquired about what would happen to her Hindu friends, who did not know the teachings of the Quran (145). She had been taught to value human beings by her parents, and that is what gets reflected in her well-balanced responses to critical and sensitive situations as an adult too.⁷

The other trait which defines her to a large extent is the urge to travel, the desire not to be rooted in one place forever. *Kaktaliyo* is as much a description of the places she has been to, as it is an account of the people who have touched her life: this constant sense of being on the move is what defines her as a person. She says that she should have been "born not in the house of a government servant but in the tent of a gypsy" (92). The near nomadic life of her parents – who moved from one place to another frequently – appealed immensely because of this itinerant desire of hers. *Kaktaliyo* is in fact the description of three such places – Bankura, Pabna and Sirajgunj, where her father was posted during her growing up years. Kolkata too, figures as a significant presence because of their frequent visits to the city. This constant sense of moving on – both literally and metaphorically – is what she calls her "philosophy of life" (93): it is only fitting then that the text would be open ended – the beginning of a new journey to Barisal, rather than a definitive closure.

Kaktaliyo stands out not only for its atypical delineation of her character but also for the manner, in which it draws upon the shared syncretic culture of undivided Bengal – a marginalised practice in

Bangladesh, especially after the predominance that Islamic religious identity acquired post 1971, as opposed to earlier emphases on linguistic and cultural identity.⁸ In Hashem's autobiography however, there is no such insecurity to prove allegiance to her Islamic lineage: it is self-evident. It is probably on account of this confidence that she can use instances from Ramayana and Mahabharata liberally,⁹ and speak about how her *Nana* instilled the motto of "*chatranam adhyanam tapah*"¹⁰ in his children's life.

Bengali Muslims were not considered "Muslim enough" for their closeness to Hindu culture and especially their regard for the Bengali language which led to language riots in East Pakistan and finally to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.¹¹ As Asim Roy has pointed out, this derogatory attitude towards the Muslims of Bengal was not something new rather had been held by scholars for over three centuries. These practices – like participating in the Hindu rituals or interpreting Islam from the standpoint of local perspectives – have been explained either as "semi-conversion" or as "degeneration" in the absence of connection with "true" Islam.¹² But Roy would rather want the phenomenon of "popular" or "folk" Islam to be looked at as "the genius of Islamic tolerance, adaptability and creative dynamism in bringing an incredibly diverse world together into a whole of unity in diversity"¹³ – an absolute necessity dictated by the current global political climate.

This especially becomes clear if the content and the reception of Taslima Nasreen's seven-part autobiography, are recalled here. Nasreen's depiction of her life in a "damaging, dysfunctional family"¹⁴ was considered representative for not only Muslim families but also for Bengalis. Ketaki Kushari Dyson had commented on the politics of usurpation of the text by sections of the media in the then volatile atmosphere of prevailing Islamophobia post 9/11 in America. It remains relevant even today, especially since Nasreen continues to claim that her experiences are universally relevant and that "the sexual molestation of children goes on within every family in Bangladesh, but is not talked about".¹⁵ As Dyson powerfully critiques:

The American publishers of the book have released it under the title *Meyebela/ My Bengali Girlhood/ A Memoir of Growing Up Female/ In a Muslim World*. But the original title is quite simply *Amar Meyebela*, and the Indian edition of the English version, published from Delhi, is likewise titled *My Girlhood/ An Autobiography*. In the American edition the word 'Bengali' has been naughtily slipped in. This adjective serves a political purpose: it manages to stereotype us Bengalis, and robs us, those Bengali women who *have not* experienced a girlhood as damaged and damaging as Taslima's, of our own reasonably normal, happy, and positive childhoods. The subtitle, 'A Memoir of Growing Up Female in a Muslim World', is even naughtier. Apart from the dangerous stereotyping of a Muslim upbringing, the phrasing, in juxtaposition with 'My Bengali Girlhood', almost erases the existence of non-Muslim Bengalis.¹⁶

To put things in perspective, the publication of *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood), the first part of Taslima Nasreen's autobiography in 1999, marked a paradigm shift in the tradition of Bengali women's autobiographies. She coined a new term *meyebela* to discuss her childhood, underlining the specific experiences of growing up as a girl in the very title of her work: before *meyebela*, there was no gender-specific term to discuss a girl's childhood in the Bengali language. Earlier women used *chelebela* – literally boyhood – which had come to acquire a unisexual connotation, or *chotobela* to refer to their childhoods.¹⁷ *Amar Meyebela* stands out not only for the neologistic title, but also for its subject matter – an open discussion of corporeality and sexuality, which was continued in the parts which followed – *Utal Haowa* (Turbulent Winds) and *Dwikhandito* (Divided into Two Halves).¹⁸ This is extremely rare in women's autobiographies – consequently, her courage, in being able to write what she does, needs to be acknowledged.

But Nasreen, never grasped that "women's experiences of Islam are myriad, and their subordination is not only based in so-called Islamic practices" despite her own situation (Hashim 12). And this is where Hashem's autobiography – in providing multiplicity of perspectives – challenges this typification: Hashem came from a similar middle-class background, with a mother who was probably similarly or even less educated than Nasreen's mother, and yet because of the personalities of her parents, the peculiarities of her familial situation, and the kind of education that she received, her

experience of growing up in a Bengali Muslim family was completely different compared to the traumatic experiences of Nasreen.

And again, since Hashem's self-narrative rarely privileges victimhood, it does not fit in within the reductive depictions of Islamic religion and culture, prevailing at the time of the publication of these autobiographies: the problems of veiling or not, do not figure at all in her discourse on subjectivity,¹⁹ when the scope of discourse when it came to Muslim women's subjectivities, was limited by predetermined ideas of the "hijab and veiling",²⁰ and it was problematic to speak of *fatwas*, given the obsession with the plight of Muslim women, informed by the "Euro-American fears of a violent Muslim Other".²¹ In *Kaktaliyo*, there is hardly any engagement with these hegemonic presuppositions: whether this is because of her diasporic location – she had moved out of her country before the declaration of its independence in 1971 – and therefore was not an active party to the changes which took place after that, will remain debatable; but what is evident from her life-narrative is that it is neither a reaction against nor an overt endorsement of her religious identity. She ascribes this understanding of Islam to the people who surrounded her – especially her grandfather and father, who were never tired of answering her endless questions as a child. Her father had viewed life from a "rational, unemotional and unprejudiced" angle, and he had extended this point of view to his conception of religion as well, (127) an understanding that he managed to pass on.

Her lukewarm reception in the Western media notwithstanding, Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* remains an important autobiographical text not only for the particular form that her self-articulation takes, but also what that implies about the discursive space available to her, to express her subjectivity. In highlighting non-conformity and itinerancy, as the determining traits of her personality, and making her religious identity, only a component of it, she was making a very important statement – not only in her individual context, but also in the context of Muslim women, in general. One's own social class, educational qualifications, financial independence, and family background determine the extent to which Islamic practices impact the life of a woman: there can be no predetermined prism of looking at such lives, making reductionist readings untenable. *Kaktaliyo*, certainly remains a testimony to this.

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Notes

- ¹ The reference is to autobiographies by women writers in West Bengal as well as Bangladesh, with the exception being Taslima Nasreen. For a detailed discussion of the self-censorship that these autobiographers subjected themselves to see Maitreyee Chattopadhyay, "Na Bola Banir Ghana Jamini," (The Dense Darkness of Unsaid Words) *Naishabda Bhenge: Atmakathane Bharatiya Nari* ed. Ishita Chakravarti et al. (Kolkata: Khoj Ekhon Parishad and Stree, 2005) 227-8.
- ² Dilara Hashem, *Kaktaliyo* (1985; Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1999) xi. All translations from the original Bengali text are mine unless otherwise stated.
- ³ See Ali Riaz, "Constructing Outraged Communities and State Responses: The Taslima Nasreen Saga in 1994 and 2007", *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 2008, 31 December 2008 (<http://samaj.revues.org/index1262.html>) (doi.org/10.4000/samaj.1262).
- ⁴ Why such writing continues to be prevalent becomes clear from the acerbic reception of writers who defy the expected paradigm – like Hashem's contemporary from Bangladesh – Taslima Nasreen. Her autobiography and the controversies surrounding them make explicit the implicit understanding of gendered subjectivity and the unwritten rules of conduct which women writers are to be subject to. See Sabyasachi Bandopadhyay,

- “What Dhaka Does Yesterday, Kolkata Does Today: Bans Taslima”, *Indian Express*, 15 November 2003. The argument against the interdiction also lays bare such presuppositions: see Mahasweta Devi, “Boi Nishiddha Kora Chole Na”, (Books cannot be banned) *Desh*, 17 December 2003, 89-91 and Shibnarayan Ray, “Banya Golaper Sugandha” (The Scent of a Wild Rose) *Desh*, 17 December 2003, 44-49.
- ⁵ See Dilara Hashem, Interview with Ahsanul Haq, *Washington Barta*, Voice of America, 14 April 2011 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_icq9Y2kno8).
- ⁶ A teenage boy had committed suicide on account of being beaten up mercilessly by his excessively conservative father: Hashem’s family had gone numb with guilt at this incident as they had complained to the boy’s father earlier, regarding the romantic letters that he had sent to Rosy. They had expected him to be told off, but not this tragic end. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 152-3.
- ⁷ When Badar, her father’s *chaprasi* had been attacked by a snake and had blood all over his legs, Dilara’s mother washed his legs, despite his protestations. There are innumerable such examples when her parents taught her to treat human beings alike, irrespective of their religion or status in life. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 25.
- ⁸ Bangladesh had been founded as a secular state, in accordance with its Constitution adopted in 1972. However, after the assassination of Bangladesh’s founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975, General Ziaur Rahman, made certain amendments to the Constitution, which compromised its secular character, and allowed religion-based-politics. In 1982, General Ershad made Islam the state religion – a gross deviation from the original Constitution, based on secular “Bengali Nationalism” on which the Liberation War of 1971 was based. Haroon Habib draws attention to these events in the light of attempts to restore the secular Constitution in Bangladesh by the Sheikh Hasina led government. See Haroon Habib, “Bangladesh: restoring secular Constitution” *The Hindu*, 25 June 2011 (<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article2132333.ece>).
- ⁹ While describing the children of a relative, her mother had referred to them as having “eyes like Garuda”; drawing attention to the mythical bird of Ramayana, who had tried to save Sita from Ravana’s clutches. Again, pointing out the danger of giving free rein to Hashem, she had chastised her brother by saying – “Eka Rame rokkha nei, tai Sugreeb dosar” [Ram alone is not enough, he had to have Sugreeb as a companion]. These statements are made in a matter-of-fact manner, as a part of regular speech. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 58, 46.
- ¹⁰ The Sanskrit saying means students should treat studying as meditation. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 65.
- ¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this, see Asim Roy, “Thinking over ‘Popular Islam’ in South Asia: Search for a Paradigm” *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics*, ed. Mushirul Hasan and Asim Roy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) 34-35.
- ¹² Asim Roy, “Thinking over ‘Popular Islam’ in South Asia”, 35-38.
- ¹³ Asim Roy, “Thinking over ‘Popular Islam’ in South Asia”, 60-61.
- ¹⁴ See Ketaki Kushari Dyson, “Some Reflections on the Art of Taslima Nasrin”, *Uttarshuri.net*. 16 May 2003 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/uttarshuri/message/479>).
- ¹⁵ Ketaki Kushari Dyson, “Some Reflections on the Art of Taslima Nasrin”.
- ¹⁶ Ketaki Kushari Dyson, “Some Reflections on the Art of Taslima Nasrin”.
- ¹⁷ Lila Majumdar, for instance, in her autobiography *Pakdandi* (A Circuitous Mountainous Trail), uses the term *chotobela* to discuss her childhood. Ashalata Sen uses the term *shaishab* – literally infancy, to discuss her earlier years in *Sekaler Katha* (The Story of Those Days). See Lila Majumdar, *Pakdandi* (1986; Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2008). Also, Ashalata Sen, *Sekaler Katha* (1990; Kolkata: Naya Udyog, 1996).
- ¹⁸ *Dwikhandito* was published as *Ka* (Speak Up) in Bangladesh.
- ¹⁹ The only time that Dilara mentions a burqa is when she sees a woman entering a public bath in Kolkata, wearing what she describes as a “white cover”. She was six years old then and had not encountered it in her immediate surroundings. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 106-7.
- ²⁰ Fauzia Ahmad, “Still ‘In Progress?’ – Methodological Dilemmas, Tensions and Contradictions in Theorizing South Asian Muslim Women”, *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*, ed. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003) 45.
- ²¹ Quoting Lila Abu-Lughod, who compared the attempt to discuss problems of Muslim women with being in a minefield in the global political climate which is obsessed with ‘the plight of Muslim woman’, Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi draws attention to the usurpation of the space by competing discourses. See Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi, “Islam, Gender and the Nation: The Social Life of Bangladeshi Fatwas”, *Communalism and Globalization in South Asia and its Diaspora*, ed. Chandana Mathur and Deana Heath (London: Routledge, 2011) 182.

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