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*Polygyny, Family and Sharafat: Discourses amongst North Indian Muslims, circa 1870–1918**

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Abstract

While historians of South Asia have examined in elaborate detail critiques of sati and child marriage in the Hindu community, a similar approach to Muslim familial reform also needs serious attention. By investigating discourses on the question of polygyny[1], this paper is an attempt in this direction. In the light of these discourses, the paper argues that polygyny, influenced by modern sensibilities of reform and social change, underwent different interpretations during the colonial period. The debate on polygyny was not homogenous and uniform and research reveals a plurality of viewpoints on the subject. The argument was often based on an assumption of sexual difference which, in some cases, emphasized the infertility and reproductive incapacity of the first wife, and in others, presented an idealization of domestic ideology where the second wife made the 'perfect' home. Simultaneously, there were also strong critiques of polygyny by women writers who underscored the misery of the first wife. These debates do not necessarily settle the question in favour of a particular position, but reflect a conversation held on marriage, children and family, *and* express how love, conjugality and affection were narrated in the public sphere.

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[1] In South Asian analysis, the practice of one man having more than one wife has been referred to as 'polygamy', a residue of colonial terminology. I will use 'polygyny' instead which has also been employed in the historical study of other Muslim societies. See Beth Baron 'The Making and Breaking of Marital Bonds in Modern Egypt' in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 275–293; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 161–162, 170, 174–5, 177.

Introduction

Polygyny was the site of much contestation and debate during the colonial period. Late-colonial discussions on polygyny raised the question about the sanctity and uniqueness of the conjugal bond. But polygyny went beyond the husband-wife relationship and cast its vexing shadow on issues of child rearing, property inheritances and relationships within the extended family. A perusal of colonial missionary records reveals that polygyny was often identified as a specific feature of Muslim societies.[2] But Muslims also engaged in this question, under the broad rubric of marital reform, with a degree of intensity that has not been remarked upon or analyzed in sufficient detail in the historiography of family and gender in colonial South Asia.[3] This paper is an attempt in that direction and hopes to add to the multiple histories of the reformist agenda in South Asia.

How did polygyny come to be constituted as a problem in the consciousness of modern Muslims? What were some of the central tenets of the argument when it was criticized or defended? How

[2] See for instance, William Muir *The Life of Mahomet and the History of Islam to the era of the Hegira* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861), Vols 3, 4.

[3] There have been several studies on Muslim family life in South Asia although none on polygyny. See Imtiaz Ahmad, *Family and Kinship among Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976); Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Barbara D. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Shahida Lateef, *Muslim Women in India: Political and Private Realities, 1890–1980* (London: Zed Books, 1990); Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism among Indian Muslim Women 1920–47* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Regional studies of Muslim women include: Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage: Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum of Bhopal* (London: Routledge, 2007); Dushka Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab: From Seclusion to Politics* (London: MacMillan, 1998); Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). More general studies include Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal: 1849–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Patricia Uberoi, ed., *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Indrani Chatterjee (ed.) *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Rochona Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Tanika Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009).

did women writers engage with the patriarchal ideology that upheld polygyny? What were the anxieties and dilemmas that co-existed with polygyny in the 'reformed' consciousness? To answer these questions, I will analyze some of the literary and theological discourses on polygyny within the *ashraf* Muslim community of North India.[4] Principal focus will be on Urdu literature of the early twentieth century. In order to contextualize the literature, I have also included an overview of the opinions expressed in the late nineteenth century by prominent religious reformers.

The early debate: polygyny as a problem in Islam

In the last two decades, there have been numerous historical and political studies devoted to discussions about the public sphere and the formation of public opinion largely due to the influence of Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. There have been feminist critiques as well as evaluation from scholars working on non-European societies.[5] These studies point out that

[4] The opinions expressed by the ashraf activists and writers in this paper are not 'representative' of Indian Islam or 'Muslimness'. There was never a uniformity of views on Muslims about their 'identity' and their ideas were always informed by regional, ethnic and linguistic differences.

[5] For feminist criticism, see Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', *Social Text* 25/26 (1990) and Joan Landes, *Woman and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1988). Challenging the separation of public and private spheres, historians of Bengali social reform have demonstrated how familial space was informed by political currents of nationalism and religious identity. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History,* ed., Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 233–253. The model of separate public and private spheres has also been challenged by studies on the Muslim family: Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Focusing on the presence of a public space in pre-modern and non-European societies, C.A. Bayly has argued for an 'indigenous public sphere' or an 'Indian ecumene' during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 180–211. Studies of colonial period include Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–40: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism.* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Veena Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites and the Public Sphere: Western India under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001). Also see, Shmuel Eisenstadt *et. al.*, ed., *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*

the colonial period in India witnessed the rise of a dynamic religious public sphere where the contest for appropriation of sacred symbols and legitimization of religious authority amongst different groups was intense.[6] Amongst Muslims, the participants in the public discourse included the *ulema* of different doctrinal orientations such as the Firangi Mahalli, the Deobandis, the Barelwis and the Ahl-i-Hadith, independent Muslim scholars like Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1819–1898)[7] or Syed Ameer Ali (1849–1928)[8] as well as numerous other historical actors who responded to the challenges of colonial rule. The plurality of the movements and responses associated with colonial rule demonstrates the multiple imaginations of Islam, Islamic values and of being Muslim in this period.[9] The increasingly open contexts over the authoritative use of symbolic language of Islam also gave rise to a distinct religious public sphere that existed at the intersection of the

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Dale Eickelman, 'The Religious Public Sphere in Early Muslim Societies', in Eisenstadt *et. al*., ed., *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies,* pp. 1–8.

[6] Barbara Metcalf, 'Imagining Community: Polemical Debates in Colonial India', in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages,* ed., Kenneth W. Jones (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 229–240. For socio-religious movements, see Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[7] For details of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's life and work, see Altaf Hussain Hali, *Hayat-i Javed* (Immortal Life), translated by David Mathews (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1994); Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978); Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan: 1857–1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 33.

[8] Syed Ameer Ali's autobiography was published in *Islamic Culture* in 1931–1932: Ameer Ali, 'Memoirs of the Late Retired Honorable Syed Ameer Ali', in *Islamic Culture,* Vol. V, No. 4, October, 1931, pp. 509–542 and Vol. VI, Nos. 1–4, January, 1932, pp. 1–18, April, 1932, pp. 16382, July, 1932, pp. 333–362, October, 1932, pp. 503–525, Hyderabad-Deccan; K.K. Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work* (Lahore: Publishers United, 1968); Martin Forward, *The Failure of Islamic Modernism? Syed Ameer Ali's Interpretation of Islam* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1999); Gail Minault, 'Ameer Ali, Syed', in John L. Esposito, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 84–85.

[9] Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002); Dietrich Reetz, *Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in the Public Sphere, 1900–47* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Harlan O. Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-century India: The Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008); Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmed Riza Khan Barelwi and his Movement, 1870–1920* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

intellectual, political and social life of Muslims. Religious pamphlets written by prominent reformers like Sayyid Ahmad Khan (Sayyid Ahmad) or Syed Ameer Ali (Ameer Ali) during the late nineteenth century addressed questions of polygyny, divorce, education and the status of women in society.

Historically, in the colonial period, polygyny was subjected to severe scrutiny and drew strong opinions from Muslims. Like their Hindu brethren, Muslims too witnessed contestation and debate of their familial and social relationships and addressed a range of issues from veiling, to women's education, to polygyny. These issues posed questions about the equality of the sexes, the role of women in the household and intimacy between husband and wife. Even though polygyny was also practiced amongst the Hindus, the issue acquired a particular salience for the Muslim community.[10] The perception that it is allowed in Islam and has a Quranic sanction made it a marker of Muslim identity and provided a distinctiveness that it otherwise would not have had. Under conditions of colonialism, polygyny came to be inextricably linked to the social identity of Muslims. Colonial officials, especially those associated with Christian evangelism, contributed to the 'Islamic' particularity of polygyny. William Muir, Secretary to the government of the North-Western Provinces, wrote a four volume text on Islam, published in 1861, called *Life of Mahomet and History of Islam to the Era of the Hegira*. Along with divorce and slavery,[11] Muir mentioned polygyny as one of the 'radical evils' stemming from the Quran 'striking as they do at the root of public morals, poisoning domestic life and disorganizing society'.[12] He further noted that polygyny in Islam 'creates an irreconcilable divergence from Christianity'.[13]

[10] For a study of polygyny in the Hindu community, see Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among Rajputs* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1995); Atul Krishna Kundu, *Polygamy and the Hindu* (Chinsura: Kundu, 1980); Malvika Karlekar, *Reflections on Kulin Polygamy: Nistarini Debi's Sekeley Katha* (New Delhi: Center for Women's Development Studies, 1995).

[11] Exploring the issue of slavery in Islam, Avril Powell has argued that slavery was constituted as a problem because 'Western critics, several of them employed as civil servants in northwest India, packaged it with other social institutions they deemed to be obstacles to 'change' in Islamic societies'. Avril Powell, 'Indian Muslim Modernists and the Issue of Slavery in Islam' in *Slavery and South Asian History,* ed., Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006), p. 279.

[12] William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet and the History of Islam to the era of the Hegira* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861), Vol. 4, p. 321.

[13] William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet and the History of Islam to the era of the Hegira* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861), Vol. 3, p. 24.

The debate on polygyny thus came to be associated with the question of Muslim identity and distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims. Furthermore, many stereotypes of Muslims, both in the past and in contemporary times, have stemmed from or revolved around polygynous marriages. It thus becomes significant that we understand this issue historically and document how Muslims themselves approached it and discussed it, for they were not sealed off from outside influences and constantly responded to and transformed their social relations. In the light of this argument, this essay historicizes the discourse of polygyny to underscore that it underwent continuous mutations and differing interpretations.

Of critical importance for our purpose are the movements of revivalism and reform which sought to resuscitate 'Islam' and uplift Muslims after their loss of political power in the subcontinent. The challenge of colonial rule was not simply the loss of Muslim political power and subsequent European domination but an urgent need to present new alternatives that did not sever continuity with the past in a world that was becoming increasingly unfamiliar. The construction of Muslim identity was accomplished in part through a debate on knowledge about sexual difference, women's bodies and reproduction. Marriage, in particular, was the site where many of the urgent concerns of the present and the past were being articulated.[14]

It would, however, be false to situate the debate on polygyny entirely in the crucible of 'identity politics' where political defeat and social fragmentation effected criticism amongst disillusioned Muslims. Participants in these discourses were often teachers, scholars and writers, men and women of learning, who were sensitive to social problems. Their intellectual engagement with the issues reflects their support for and faith in rational reform and in open discussion of practices, customs and beliefs. In sketching a brief trajectory of this debate, I also hope to highlight concerns and anxieties about being a 'modern' Muslim, and illustrate the dynamism and richness of Muslim modernism in South Asia.

[14] Faisal Devji discusses the 'privatization of *shurafa*' and the spatial construction of the Muslim home in the reform movements of the nineteenth century. Faisal Devji, 'Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women's Reform, 1857–1900', in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India, Volume two,* ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), 99–114. Also see Barbara Metcalf, 'Islamic Reform and Islamic Women: Maulana Thanawi's *Jewelry of Paradise*', in Metcalf, *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 184–195.

The initial rejoinders by Muslim modernists to colonial criticism, including the writings of Sayyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali, were published in the 1870s and were mostly directed towards an English-speaking audience. The religious thoughts of Sayyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali constitute a significant contribution to 'sacred authority'.[15] Eickelman and Piscatori argue that the discussion of Islam and politics, based on the assumption that Islam makes no distinction between religious and political realms, is not very useful in the understanding of Muslim politics. Rather, they view politics as the context over the interpretation of symbols that acquire religious meaning when appropriated by authority. This authority does not imply an 'Islamic state' but is invested in individuals and institutions who become legitimate bearers of authority because they embody cherished values and gradually transform themselves into 'natural' leaders through the manipulation of symbols and the invocation of tradition. These symbols are subject to widely different interpretations and it is not only the *ulema* who speak for Islam but a wide range of social and political actors differently positioned in society, resulting in a 'fragmentation of authority'.[16]

Sayyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali have contributed to what has come to be called a 'rationalist' interpretation of religious faith, practice and experience and the revision of Islamic theology to make it more consonant with the empirical sciences. The inclusion of their discourse will illustrate how polygyny was informed by ideas associated with 'modernity'. I have considered here in particular their two major works: first is *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* by Sayyid Ahmad published in 1870, and the second is *The Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Muhammad* by Ameer Ali published in 1873. The Urdu version of Sayyid Ahmad's *A Series of Essays* was published in 1887 as *Al-Khutbat al-Ahmadiya fi al-Arab wa al-sirat al-Muhammadiya.*[17] Sayyid Ahmad's *Essays* contains commentaries on the Quran, theological literature on the Prophet Muhammad and disputation on Islamic practices and institutions such as polygyny, divorce and slavery, while Ameer Ali's *Critical Examination of Muhammad* is an erudite and exhaustive account of the history of

[15] I use the term, 'sacred authority' as employed by Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori in their study of politics in the Muslim world.

[16] Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[17] Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Al-Khutbat al-Ahmadiya fi al-Arab wa al-sirat al-Muhammadiya*, Muhammad Ismail Panipati, ed. (Karachi: Nafees Academy, 1964), reprint.

Islam, its principles and its relation to other monotheistic faiths. Both Sayyid Ahmad and Ameer Ali join issues with European scholars of Islam, critiquing the works of Sprenger, William Muir, Weil, and Thomas Carlyle, amongst others. On the question of polygyny, Sayyid Ahmad employed his framework of 'natural theology' while Ameer Ali scrutinized it through the idea of historical variability.

Sayyid Ahmad addressed the issue of polygyny in one of the essays, entitled 'On the question whether Islam has been Beneficial or Injurious to Human Society in General, and to the Mosaic and Christian Dispensations'.[18] His ideas were developed in relation to the scientific discoveries that he felt were challenging Islam. The test of religious truth, according to Sayyid Ahmad, is conformity with the norms of natural reason and his attempt at 'rationalization' of religion has been called 'natural theology'. He defines religion, as

> that true principle to which all the ideas and actions of man should be conformable (*sic*), so long as he retains the use of his physical and intellectual powers... and that true principle, as far as man's intellectual powers enable him to discover, is no other than Nature.[19]

He writes that 'as nature is true and perfect, this principle must necessarily be true and perfect, and this true and perfect principle is what we call true religion'.[20] For Sayyid Ahmad, the test, therefore, of the truth or falsity of various religions is to ascertain whether or not they accord with 'natural principles'.

Sayyid Ahmad's Islam does not encourage the practice of polygyny but it falls short of total denunciation of the practice. The use of permission to marry more than one wife, he argued, was a privilege and

> reserved for such as for physical reasons may stand in need of it, but in the absence of such an excuse the indulgence in it is wholly contrary to the virtues and morality taught by Islam.[21]

For Sayyid Ahmad, recourse to polygyny was 'justified' only by 'real necessity'. This 'necessity' was 'perpetuation of one's kind or

[18] Saiyid Ahmad Khan, 'Whether Islam has been Beneficial...', *A Series of Essays,* Polygyny is discussed from pages 147 to 152; in *Al-Khutbat,* see pp. 190–198. He also discussed this question separately in an article: 'Ta'ddud-i Azvaj ka Mas'ala'. In *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid,* Muhammad Ismail Panipati (ed.), Vol. 13, reprint (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi Adab, 1963), pp. 259–265.

[19] Sayyid Ahmad, *Life of Muhammad*, v; in *Al-khutbat,* see pp. 19–20.

[20] Ibid., p. v.

[21] Ibid., p. 147.

children'. He argued that 'when, from whatever cause, this helpmate (woman in marriage) fails to perform her natural duty, some remedy must surely have been appointed by the Creator to meet this exigency and that remedy is polygamy'.[22] Sayyid Ahmad endorsed childbearing as one genuine and rightful cause for polygyny to be practiced, which we shall also observe later in the novel *Iqbal Dulhan* by Bashiruddin Ahmad. What is crucial to note here is that fertility of a woman and reproduction were indispensable to the definition of marriage. Concepts of fertility and reproduction had social and religious implications, and practices and traditions of marriage and familial relationships were woven around sexuality and childbearing. Related to this understanding of marriage are notions of wifehood and motherhood. Only those women with reproductive capacity could belong to a monogamous marriage.

In explaining his position, Sayyid Ahmad defined marriage as a practice that counters loneliness of man where God made in woman a helpmate for man 'who is destined to share with him the cares and the amenities, the sorrows and the pleasures of life'.[23] Moreover, whatever weakened individual and social happiness of man must be regarded as serious evil.[24] For Sayyid Ahmad, the practice of polygyny was 'not an unrestrained gratification of animal appetites' but permissible with restraints such 'as perfect equality of rights and privileges, love and affection among all wives etc', and that:

> these restrictions and regulations materially serve to prevent truly pious and religious persons from indulging in polygamy, for they almost immediately discover that the availing themselves of this privilege, without fulfilling its conditions and observing its regulations, which are so strict as to be extremely difficult to be complied with. . .[sic][25]

In summary, one could argue that Sayyid Ahmad was critical of polygyny but also believed that it could be permitted for childbearing. This ambiguity, however, did not desensitize him to the question of rights and sentiments in marriage, and he further contended that polygyny must maintain equality of rights. It must be noted that this argument published in English in 1871 is not an isolated piece by Sayyid Ahmad on the 'woman's question' and he had also written an article on women's rights in his journal *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* in 1871.

[22] Ibid., p. 148.
[23] Ibid., p. 148.
[24] Ibid., p. 148.
[25] Ibid., pp. 148–149.

Entitled *Auraton ke Huqooq* (Rights of Women), he argued that 'till date no civilized country has bestowed on women the rights Islam gave them'. To illustrate his point, he emphasized that in England no married women could enter into any contract on their own, that their property and other possessions came into the control of their husbands and that they could not buy anything without their husband's permission. Contrasting this to Islamic law, he pointed out that Islam allows a woman to independently choose her spouse, own property, sign a contract with a man as the initiator and buy, sell, gift or endow her property to whosoever she wishes.[26]

Sayyid Ahmad also addressed polygyny in his Urdu writings where he conversed primarily with the *ulema* instead of the British officials. In a full-length article on polygyny, he argued for a principle of gender difference between men and women due to 'natural' reasons, and then engaged in exegesis of a *hadith* that Muslim theologians used to support polygyny. He doubted the correctness of the *hadith* and contended that it was picked up, twisted and exaggerated by the missionaries and Western critics of Islam. He concluded the article by saying that:

> The command in Qur'an is for monogamy. Polygyny is allowed only in those special circumstances when reason and ethics in response to the fulfillment of the requirements of human nature and culture legitimize its practice, and when there is no fear of violation of the rule of justice.[27]

Sayyid Ahmad retained his ambiguous position in his Urdu writings although there is a stronger emphasis on monogamy. He remained perturbed by the missionary critique of Islam and amongst his last writings is an incomplete article on the Prophet's wives.[28]

The other important English commentary on Islam was Syed Ameer Ali's *Critical Examination of Muhammad* published in 1873.[29] In his discussion of polygyny, Ameer Ali acknowledged the 'conditional

[26] Sayyid Ahmad, 'Auratoon ke Huqooq' in *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid,* Muhammad Ismail Panipati (ed.), Vol. 5 (reprint) (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1962), pp. 194–199.

[27] Sayyid Ahmad, 'Ta'addud-i Azwaj ka Masla' in *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid,* Muhammad Ismail Panipati (ed.), Vol. 13 (reprint), (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1963), p. 265.

[28] Sayyid Ahmad, 'Azwaj-i Mutahharat-i Rasul-i Khuda Sallallah-u alaih-i wsallam' in *Maqalat-i Sir Saiyid*, Ismail Panipati (ed.), Vol 4 (reprint), (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1962), pp. 222–259.

[29] For an analysis of Ameer Ali's position on women, see Avril Powell, 'Islamic Modernism and Women's Status: The Influence of Syed Ameer Ali' in Avril Powell and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (eds) *Rhetoric and Reality: Gender and the Colonial Experience in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 282–317.

clause' implicit in the Quranic injunction on Islam. But his critique of polygyny differs from Sayyid Ahmad's in its strong emphasis on history instead of 'natural theology' as a basis of explanation. He first presents an overview of the practice of polygyny in different cultures ranging among Persians, Spartans, Romans, Babylonians, Athenians and Romans, at different historical periods to establish that 'history, proves conclusively that, until very recent times, polygamy was not considered so reprehensible as it is now'.[30] Underscoring a historical perspective, he adds that:

> the fact must be borne in mind that the existence of polygamy depends on circumstances. Certain times, certain conditions of society make its practice absolutely needful. . . . But with the progress of thought, with the change of conditions ever going on in this world, the necessity for polygamy, or more properly polygyny, disappears, and its practice is tacitly abandoned or expressly forbidden.[31]

Following this contention, Ameer Ali argues that in countries where the means for women to help themselves exist, this practice has come to be regarded as evil while in those societies where such circumstances are non-existent 'where the means, which in civilized communities enable women to help themselves, are absent or wanting, polygamy must necessarily continue to exist'.[32]

Ameer Ali's approach to the issue of polygyny also reflects his judgment of unfair customs or practices that would become a target for reformers. For him, evil was a relative term contingent upon how people view morals in their societies and that 'progress of ideas and changes in the conditions of a people may make it evil in its tendency and in process of time it may be made by the state, illegal'.[33] Invoking a sort of historical relativism, he maintains that the ethical judgment of usages and customs hinges on 'the circumstances, or as they are or are not in accordance with the conscience—"the spirit"—of the time, is a fact much ignored by superficial thinkers'.[34]

Besides Ameer Ali, other Western-educated Muslims from Bengal had also begun to condemn polygyny.[35] Dilawar Husain Ahmad Mirza, the first Muslim graduate from Calcutta University, appointed Deputy

[30] Ameer Ali, *Life of Mohammad*, p. 223.
[31] Ibid., p. 227.
[32] Ibid., p. 227.
[33] Ibid., p. 236.
[34] Ibid., p. 236.
[35] See also Shibli Nomani, 'Ta'addud-i Azwaj' in *Maqalat-i Shibli, Volume 1*, (Azamgarh: Dar-ul Musanafeen, Shibli Academy, 1999), reprint, pp. 146–155.

Magistrate and Deputy Collector in the Provincial Executive Service in 1861, wrote 'The Causes of the Decline of Mohammadan Civilization' between 1869 and 1879. In this tract, he argued that polygyny is one '. . .of those peculiarities of Mohammadan society which is sure to keep us in a backward state of civilization so long as the prevailing ideas on the subject should not be modified'. He also maintains that polygyny directed men's minds towards sensuality and 'the sensual pleasures enervate both the body and the mind—and to this enervation must be ascribed the large proportion of incompetent sovereigns amongst Mohammadan communities'.[36]

Ameer Ali criticized polygyny from a very different perspective to that of Sayyid Ahmad. For him, history passed the verdict on traditions that needed to be 'reformed' and while polygyny was appropriate for the Prophet's time, it must disappear in communities where women had acquired education and rights. It must be added that Ameer Ali agreed with Sayyid Ahmad on the conditional clause requiring justice to all partners in polygyny and believed that this condition 'may be considered as prohibitive of a plurality of wives'.[37] Others, like Dilawar Husain Mirza, believed that polygyny was one of the chief causes not only for the 'decline' and 'backwardness' of Muslims but also for 'incompetent sovereigns'.

The initial colonial debate on polygyny was limited largely to the publication of books and journal articles. By the 1890s, however, it had expanded to a much wider scale and was held in newly formed *anjumans* and associations. One Muhammad Abdul Ghani (Ghani) defended polygyny at a lecture given at the sixth anniversary of Anjuman Himayat-i Islam in 1891. Ghani insisted that the chief aim of marriage was 'the propagation of the kind under most favourable conditions' and polygyny was essential during 'the period of women's pregnancy where the man can impregnate another woman' driven by 'physiology and nature' or when the couple is unable to bear children or have only female children.[38]

Thus, there was no single opinion on the question of polygyny. This diversity and range of ideas expressed itself more forcefully and

[36] Dilawar Husain Ahmad Mirza, 'The Causes of the Decline of Mohammadan Civilization', in Sultan Jahan Salik (ed.), *Muslim Modernism in Bengal: Selected Writings of Delawarr Hosaen Ahmed Meerza, 1840–1913* (Dacca: Center for Social Studies, Dacca University, 1980), pp. 55–56.

[37] Ameer Ali, *Life of Mohammad*, p. 226.

[38] Maulavi Muhammad Ghani, *Polygamy: A Lecture* (Lahore: The Mohammadan Tract and Book Depot, 1891), pp. 3, 11–12.

vibrantly in the novels of the early twentieth century, informed by changing historical conditions.

Urdu literary cultures

Critical to an understanding of the Muslim family in North India is the Urdu public sphere that acquired greater reach and expansion with the coming of the printed word. Urdu language formed its own cultural and intellectual community through institutional spaces such as schools, the press and the publishing industry.[39] Both the elite and the masses used written media and oral communication to reinforce a culture of communication and discussion. Most Urdu newspapers and weeklies were established by the mid-nineteenth century and flourished, not just in the major cities of Lahore, Delhi and Lucknow, but also in smaller towns such as Bijnor, Banaras, Rampur and Ajmer.[40] Women's journals beginning in the early twentieth century carried opinions on marriage, divorce, education and work.[41] In addition to journalism, novels were also directly associated with social transformation and were a method in persuasion.[42] Urdu novels were crucial in raising

[39] In her excellent book, Francesca Orsini describes the process through which Hindi developed a 'publicness' which ensured that it was appropriate for discussing public matters, literature and representing the *'jati'*. Francesca Orsini. *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–40: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[40] *Banaras Akhbar* was started in 1845 in Banaras, *Chashma-e Faiz* in Siyalkot in 1853, *Khairkhva Khalaiq* was started in 1858 in Ajmer, *Dabdaba Sikandari* was started in Rampur in 1867 while *Nayyar Akhbar* began in 1868 in Bijnor. Other dailies included *Jame Jamshid* in Muradabad in 1870, *Akhtar-e Hind* in Saharanpur in 1875 and *Shamsul Awadhi* in Faizabad in 1884. Nadir Ali Khan, *Hindustani Press, 1556–1900* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1990), pp. 28, 74, 101, 142–143, 190, 225, 291–292, 306–310, 359, 360. In English, see Nadir Ali Khan, *A History of Urdu Journalism* (Delhi: Idarah-e-Adabiyat-e Delli, 1991).

[41] See Gail Minault, 'Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and *Tahzib-un Niswan:* Women's Rights in Islam and Women's Journalism in Urdu', in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages,* ed., Kenneth W. Jones (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 179–199; Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars,* pp. 105–157; Margrit Pernau, 'Female Voice: Women Writers in Hyderabad at the beginning of the Twentieth Century', *Annual of Urdu Studies* 17 (2002): pp. 36–54.

[42] *Mir'at al-arus* by Nazir Ahmad Dehlavi (1836–1912) was published in 1869, followed by *Fasane Mubtala* in 1885 and *Ayyama* in 1891. Similar to Nazir Ahmad's *Mira't al-urus,* Altaf Husain Hali (1837–1914) wrote *Majalis un-Nisa,* first published in 1874. For an extensive discussion of Nazir Ahmad's life and work, see Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi, *Maulavi Nazir Ahmad Dehlavi: Ahval-o-Asar* (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi Pasand, 1971). Also see Gail Minault *Secluded Scholars,* pp. 31–38; Mushirul Hasan, *A Moral*

questions about the family, and about women's status within it, from different perspectives. They portray in extensive detail glimpses of the activities of the household and the family giving specific descriptions of rituals, customs, social relationships and everyday life. Urdu literature, therefore, serves as a useful and rich resource for writing the history of the family.

Amongst Urdu novels, *Gudar ka Lal: Khawateen aur Ladkiyon ke liye aik Naseehat khez Novel* (The Ruby in Rags: A Novel with Advice for Women and Girls) by Akbari Begum (d. 1929)[43] published in 1907,[44] and *Iqbal Dulhan* (The Bride Iqbal) by Bashiruddin Ahmad (d. 1927) published in 1908, have both been analyzed here because they occupy a special position in terms of their wide impact on the community, their readership and the responses they received from the Urdu-speaking public. A particular instance is the reception of the novel *Gudar ka Lal* by Saliha Abid Husain (d. 1988), a notable modern Urdu writer.[45] In

Reckoning: Muslim Intellectuals in Nineteenth-century Delhi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 132–184 and C. M. Naim, 'Prize-winning *Adab:* A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification', in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Islam,* ed., Barbara D. Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 290–314. For a discussion of Hali's novels, see Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 39–57; Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (N.J.: Zed Books, 1992); M. Sadiq, *History of Urdu Literature,* 2nd edn. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 210–219; Saliha Abid Husain, *Yadgar-i Hali,* 4th edn., (New Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqi-e Urdu Hind, 1975).

[43] Akbari Begum was the *momani* (wife of maternal uncle) of Nazr Sajjad Hyder, mother of the well-known Urdu writer Qurratulain Hyder. She wrote *Gudar ka Lal* under the pseudonym of Valida-e Afzal Ali (Mother of Afzal Ali) in consideration of the practice of strict *purdah*, an integral part of female living, among *ashraf* Muslims. Akbari Begum's other works include *Guldasta-e Muhabbat, Sho'la-e Pinhan* and *Iffat-e Niswan.* For details, see Qurratulain Hyder, *Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai* (The Task of the World is Endless), (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2003), reprint.

[44] Qurratulain Hyder mentions that the book was published in 1907: *Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2003), reprint, p. 150. Shaista Suhrawardy in her study writes that it was serialized in the journal *Sharif Bibi* in 1911–1912 and then published in book form: Shaista Akhtar B. Suhrawardy *A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story,* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), reprint, pp. 110–111.

[45] Saliha Abid Husain, great grand daughter of Altaf Husain Hali (d. 1914), was born in Panipat in modern-day Haryana in 1913. She received her primary education at Panipat and Aligarh, and read voraciously as a child. Her first attempt at novel-writing was in 1929, which was unpublished and eventually destroyed by her. She, however, continued writing in women's journals like *Tahzib-un Niswan, Saheli, Noorjahan* and *Ismat.* She also won prizes from the editor for the articles that she wrote for *Ismat*. From 1936, she started writing speeches for All India Radio and later wrote articles that were recited at *Bazm-e Khawateen* (Women's Association) at Jamia Millia

her autobiography, she singles out *Gudar ka Lal* as the most significant influence upon her married life. The novel had a special resonance for Saliha Abid Husain (Saliha Husain) because the dilemmas and situation of one of its female characters, Mehr Jabeen, held a striking resemblance to her own life. Saliha Husain was the second wife of Sayyid Abid Husain (d. 1978), (Abid Husain) himself a major modern Muslim scholar,[46] in a polygynous marriage and she, much like Mehr Jabeen in *Gudar ka Lal,* developed friendly and warm relations with the first wife of her husband. As a young girl, Saliha Husain was inspired by Surayya Jabeen, another prominent character in the novel. But she writes that she 'much later realized that the character which actually influenced me the most, in fact, which I unconsciously came to regard as my ideal was Mehr Jabeen only'.[47] Moreover, the novel also acquired a legendary status amongst *ashraf* women, and was given in marriage as part of their dowry.[48]

Islamia, New Delhi. Her first published novel was *Azra* which appeared in 1944. She summarized her pain and trauma of the plunder of Panipat during Partition in a series of articles called *Niras mein Aas* (Hope in Despair) which was published from Bombay, and dedicated to Gandhi. Her second novel *Atish-e Khamosh* (The Silent Fire) was published in 1948, and her third novel *Rah-e Amal* was published in 1957. Her other important works include *Khawateen-e Karbala* (Women of Karbala) and *Yadgar-e Hali,* a biography of Hali. Saliha Abid Husain, *Silsala-e Roz-o- Shab: Khudnavisht* (The Cycle of Day and Night: An Autobiography), (New Delhi: Maktaba Jamia Limited, 1984), pp. 280–290.

[46] Sayyid Abid Husain was born in 1896 in Bhopal, where he received his primary education. After school he attended Muir Central College in Allahabad and then went to Oxford for further education. Unable to study at Oxford, he decided to go to Germany where he completed his Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Berlin in 1925. See Sayyid Abid Husain, *Hayat-i Abid: Khudnavisht* (Life of Abid: An Autobiography), (Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1984). He translated important philosophical and literary tracts from German into Urdu, including Goethe's Faust: Part I (*Goethe ka Faust: Hissah Avval,* Aurangabad: Anjuman-i Taraqqi-ye Urdu, 1931), Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (*Tanqid-i Aql-i Mahaz,* Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqi-ye Urdu, 1941) and Boer's History of Islamic Philosophy (*Tarikh-i Falsafa-i Islam,* Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1936). His translations from English include Gandhi's My Experiments with Truth (*Talash-i Haqq: Mahatma Gandhi ki Aap Biti,* Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1935) and Plato's Selected Dialogues (*Mukalamat-i Aflatoon,* Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqi-ye Urdu, 1942). Some of his significant original writings are *National Culture of India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961); *Destiny of Indian Muslims* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965); *The Way of Gandhi and Nehru* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1959); and *Parda-i Gaflat* (The Veil of Ignorance), (Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1967).

[47] Saliha Abid Husain, *Silsala-e Roz-o-Shab*, p. 214.

[48] Qurratulain Hyder, *Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2003), pp. 149–150.

Iqbal Dulhan, too, received immense acclaim and attracted enthusiastic comments from Urdu literati. Reformer and Urdu novelist Nazir Ahmad wrote that:

whatever Iqbal Mirza (protagonist) did was correct and this was what he ought to have done as someone born in a *sharif* family. . .. He has successfully shown the circumstances of the second *nikah* as legitimate.[49]

Zaka Ullah (1832–1911), one of the most distinguished Muslim scholars of nineteenth century North India, said that:

the reasons for the necessity of a second marriage have been given in such a manner that an Indian educated in England who commits this would not be dubbed as uncivilized even by a civilized European. The story is unprecedented in its didactic message both for men and women.[50]

Similarly, Sayyid Ahmad Dehlavi (1846–1918) said that the author

has established the second marriage as praiseworthy to the extent that there is no space of criticism even by the rationalist of Europe. Whatever he has written is commendable and to be dutifully obeyed by women and men.[51]

Both *Gudar ka Lal* and *Iqbal Dulhan* argue, as we shall see below, that under certain conditions polygyny was acceptable. There were, however, some female writers who refused to compromise with polygyny and rejected it completely. They not only criticized the practice in print but also acquired a certain leadership in the community due to their social activism. Nazr Sajjad Hyder (d. 1967) is one such figure. *Ah-e Mazluman* (Sighs of the Oppressed) by Nazr Sajjad Hyder published in 1912(?) is included to illustrate a difference of opinion on polygyny amongst Muslim women, to highlight that they were actively involved in public conversation on issues pertinent to the community and that an important section of Muslim intelligentsia was female.[52]

[49] Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Iqbal Dulhan,* p. 274.
[50] Ibid., p. 268.
[51] Ibid., pp. 278–279.
[52] Amongst the many Muslim women involved in writing and activism were Muhammadi Begum (1878?–1908), Rokeya Sakhavat Husain (1880–1932), Khujista Akhtar Banu Suhrawardiya (1874–1919), Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz (1896–1979), Rashid Jahan (1905–1952). See Gail Minault *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Shaista Akhtar B. Suhrawardy *A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), reprint.

Women engage masculinist codes of respectability and domesticity

Akbari Begum came from an illustrious Saiyid family of Muradabad, a well known city situated in the northwestern region in modern Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. Her father Mir Mazhar Ali lived in Siyalkot, a town now in Pakistan. Akbari was born here some time in the 1870s (the actual date is uncertain). She was given the name 'Kaniz Abbas' at the time of her birth, but was better known as Akbari Begum. She was married to Mir Fazl Ali, maternal uncle, of writer Nazr Sajjad Hyder.[53]

Qurratulain Hyder mentions some crucial events in the life of Akbari Begum that inspired her to write about the world of women. Akbari Begum's family, though fully settled in Lahore in Punjab visited their ancestral home in Muradabad, Uttar Pradesh during festivals and family rituals. On one such occasion when she, along with several members of her extended family were in Muradabad, she observed keenly the rites and superstitious beliefs connected with the old social practices, which had a close bearing on women's lives. During this visit, Qurratualain Hyder reports that Akbari Begum met her eighty year old maternal aunt and observed her plight. She was believed to be possessed by a jinn[54] the very first day of her wedding and therefore was not allowed to leave for her husband's house. Constrained to stay back home, she confined herself to her prayer carpet, engaging all the time in litanies, repeating the name of Allah alone all through her life. Hyder notes that Akbari perspicaciously noted that while the women in the inner quarters of the house were afflicted with diseases like tuberculosis, hysteria and melancholia, the men outside engaged in pursuits of pleasure and were busy in gambling. These experiences influenced Akbari's ideas about gender relations in society and provided her with plenty of materials for her novels. Her first novel, *Guldasta-e Muhabbat* (The Bouquet of Love), was written under the pseudonym of Abbasi Murtaza.[55]

'*Gudar ka Lal*', written in three volumes and described as *Khawateen aur Ladkiyon ke Liye aik Naseehat Khez Novel*' (A Novel with Counsels

[53] Qurratulain Hyder, *Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2003), p. 145.

[54] In Islamic mythology, *jinn* (or genie) are believed to be supernatural creatures that can spiritually possess a human body.

[55] Ibid., pp. 149–150.

for Women and Girls), is a dense and multilayered novel that tackles numerous questions simultaneously, such as the literacy and education of women, incompatible marriage, polygyny and other dilemmas associated with family relationships. It revolves around the fate of three children: two sisters and one brother. Zinatunnisa (Zinat) and Qamarunnisa (Qamar) are the two sisters, the brother's name is not mentioned, but sister-in-law Amirunnisa (Amir) is the head of the household. Qamar has two sons, Hamid Ali and Yusuf Raza, and a daughter, Khairunnisa. Amir has six children: three sons, Khair Ali, Hasan Raza and Shakir and three daughters, Hamida Begum, Maqbool and Surayya Jabeen. These cousins have intermarried. Khair Ali is married to Khairunnisa and Maqbool is married to Yusuf Raza.

Gudar ka Lal follows multiple plots as it traces the stories of the children of these sisters, their education, their marriages and their other familial and non-familial relationships. Yusuf Raza's first marriage is with Maqbool, who has little education, and proves to be a total ill-match to the educated Yusuf Raza. To 'overcome' this discrepancy, he marries a highly educated woman, Mehr Jabeen. This constitutes his second marriage and the dynamic of relationship between Mehr Jabeen, his second wife, and Maqbool, his first wife, comprises most of the novel. This paper will concentrate on the triad between Maqbool, Mehr Jabeen and Yusuf Raza involving polygyny, leaving aside the other storylines of this complex novel.

The second novel under consideration is *Iqbal Dulhan* by Bashiruddin Ahmad (Ahmad), son of the Urdu writer Nazir Ahmad Dehlavi, noted above. Ahmad held a high administrative position in Nizam's service in Hyderabad, Deccan. He took early retirement and settled in his home town of Delhi, where he died in 1927. Ahmad is best known for his voluminous writings in Urdu on history. These works include *Waqi'at-e Darul Hukumat Dehli*, a history of Delhi in three volumes, *Waqi'at-e Mamlikat-i Bijapur* also in three volumes, a text on Mughal Farmans titled '*Faramin-e Salatin*'; and another on Queen Victoria called *Hayat-e Malika-e Victoria, Qaisara-e Hind*. Besides his historical writing, Ahmed also wrote about family and marriage including *Husn-e Muasharat, Islah-e Muashiat, Lakht-e Jigar* and *Fughan-e Ashraf*.[56] He acknowledged his literary and intellectual debt to his father, and mentioned especially the influence of *Mirat al-Arus* on his *Iqbal Dulhan*, desiring 'to walk the

[56] Muhammad Muslim Dehlavi, 'Maulavi Bashiruddin Ahmad: Aik Muarrikh Tarikh ke Jharoke se' in Salahuddin, ed., *Dilli Wale* (Delhi: Urdu Academy, volume II, 1988), pp. 217–231.

same path and build on the foundation that he [Nazir Ahmad] had established'.[57]

The novel *Iqbal Dulhan* follows the life of Iqbal Mirza who is born and raised in an *ashraf* family of Delhi in the early twentieth century. The plot revolves around the second marriage of Iqbal Mirza and the ordeals that the family encounter as a result of this polygynous union. Iqbal Mirza's father, Nawab Mirza, expires early in his childhood leaving behind two married daughters, Iqbal and his baby sister. Iqbal Mirza receives his primary education at Aligarh University and later studies at Cambridge. Upon his return from England, he joins the Civil Service and is appointed Assistant Commissioner in the North Indian district of Gurgaon. Well settled in a job, his mother begins her search for a suitable bride. He is married to Zaibunnisa, who is also brought up in an *ashraf* home and lives in the same neighbourhood as the family of Iqbal Mirza. The early conjugal life of Iqbal Mirza and Zaibunnisa is joyous and blissful. However, this happiness is short-lived since they do not bear any children. Iqbal Mirza's desire for a child leads him to contemplate a second marriage. His decision to have a second marriage is marked by dilemma and torment. The confusion and anxiety of Iqbal Mirza, and the grief and heartache of his wife over the second marriage, forms the basic plot of the story. After the birth of children from the second wife, their marital tension is eased, the relations improve and Zaibunnisa accepts Iqbal's second marriage. The co-wives live on friendly terms, and Iqbal Mirza is happy.

Sharafat and the question of 'legitimate polygyny'

Both *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Gudar ka Lal* depict the major concerns of the *ashraf* community, where the protagonists are ideal characters displaying praiseworthy behaviour that is to be inculcated through education. The perfection and nobility of the protagonist in *Iqbal Dulhan* was centred on worries about 'respectability'. He is a man fit to be emulated. Conscious of the death of his father at a tender age, he steadfastly and diligently completes his education at Aligarh, earning a scholarship to higher education at Cambridge. In his childhood, he remains obedient to his mother, and in adulthood he maintains a courteous relationship with her and other elders of the family.

[57] Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Iqbal Dulhan* (Delhi: Khari Bavli, 1908), p. 3.

In addition to his steady relationships, he also honours religion and his cultural heritage, placing a high value on adherence to the basic principles of Islam. This 'respectability', observed in *Iqbal Dulhan,* was an ideal of *kachahri* culture: the Muslim milieu that determined the expectations and aspirations of Muslims under British rule.[58] *Sharafat* or 'respectability' was to be acquired through education, employment and culture.[59]

Similarly, the society depicted in *Gudar ka Lal* highlights the struggle between the 'new' lifestyle, on the one hand, where education and employment were new markers of 'respectability', and the more conventional family structure on the other, where marriage, especially of young women, occurred at an early age and education at higher levels, after adulthood was seen as a violation of filial honour and duty. The novel reflects this conflict within the same generation and between cousins. Surayya and Hasan Raza are the prototypes of the 'respectable' protagonist common to *ashraf* novels. They are astute in understanding human relationships, adjust to demanding situations and, most importantly, desire a good education to acquire greater social mobility. Both Hasan Raza and Surayya flee from their homes to Lahore to carry on their education. In contrast to Surayya, Maqbool, her sister, is not interested in education and grows up to be indifferent to the needs of her husband, Yusuf Raza, and their child. *Gudar ka Lal* explores the implications of this incongruity in education between Surayya and Maqbool in extensive detail. In addition to their discrepancy, it also highlights the contrast in education between Yusuf Raza and Maqbool. Yusuf Raza educates himself to become a lawyer, whereas Maqbool remains uneducated. In *Gudar ka Lal,* this discrepancy between husband and wife, or men and women more generally, defines the contours of an 'incompatible marriage'. 'Incompatible marriage' points to a larger problem at the centre of modernity in the *ashraf* community in India. It turned the familial space into a domain of greater discord and dispute, where women

[58] For an examination of *sharif* culture in the context of Aligarh Muslims, see David Lelyveld's *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[59] The education of women as a transmitter of culture in the reformist project has been made by Gail Minault in *Secluded Scholars* (Delhi: Oxford, 1998), pp. 4–9. Recently, Ruby Lal has argued in greater detail, for Nazir Ahmad's *Mirat al-Arus* and *Taubt-al-Nasuh,* that the object of reform of the *sharif* woman was to 'preserve family, community and culture through her'. 'Gender and Sharafat: Rereading Nazir Ahmad', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* Volume 18, Part 1 (2008), pp. 15–30.

and men were confronted with ever greater challenges involving adjustment, accommodation and compromise. Akbari Begum permits Yusuf Raza to surmount his 'incompatible marriage' through a polygynous marriage to an educated woman, Mehr Jabeen. In the resulting triad of co-wives and husband, she constructs a story involving the development of friendship between the co-wives.

Both *Gudar ka Lal* and *Iqbal Dulhan* argue, although differently, that under certain conditions polygyny is acceptable and even required. Ahmad first expresses his views on marriage and polygyny when a wedding proposal for Iqbal Mirza arrives from a family of orthodox Muslims where the bride's grandfather is a respectable *maulavi* (religious scholar) of Delhi. The proposal contains an *iqrarnama* or agreement that the groom's family is expected to approve if they are to proceed with the marriage. The agreement contained a clause against polygyny where a polygynous marriage by Iqbal Mirza would be unacceptable to the first wife as well as to her family. Iqbal Mirza rejects the clause and makes the classical argument defending polygyny since it is justified in the Quran. He insists that 'the person who attaches this condition and the person who agreed to it are not Muslims, in my opinion, as this is obviously contrary to the Quranic injunction'.[60] He then puts forward the position that the conditions which the Quran imposes upon the practice of polygyny are too difficult for realization and therefore the practice cannot be sustained or supported for

> a wise man with even a little sense of consequence would not undergo this trouble, and drag himself into this predicament. . .. In the Quran, God forbid, there can never be anything meaningless or bereft of the public good.[61]

In spite of this reading, Ahmad does add that 'those who take undue advantage of this conditional divine injunction, which by no means implies that it is not practiced, are culprits'.[62] Therefore, men who have a second marriage out of contempt for women, or to gratify their sexuality, are condemnable, and insult their religion. This assertion is used throughout the novel to distinguish between acceptable reasons for marriage as opposed to base ones. Those who engage in latter situations have hearts like 'stones ensconced in human flesh. They are

[60] Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Iqbal Dulhan*, p. 82.
[61] Ibid., p. 83.
[62] Ibid., p. 85.

not human and are totally deprived of compassion and empathy'.[63] This animosity towards 'bad polygyny' raises the question of 'good' or 'acceptable' polygynous unions. Or more specifically, under what conditions was polygyny allowed or considered 'legitimate?' The notion of 'legitimate polygyny' cannot be understood without clarifying beliefs about an 'ideal' marriage. In *Iqbal Dulhan,* a marriage is considered ideal only when the couple can raise children and continue a familial heritage. Therefore, polygyny is permissible only when the couple cannot, for some reason, have children. As Ahmad writes, 'the real purpose of marriage is breeding and unbroken succession of lineage. When this very purpose is lost, then this world and everything in it loses its worth and meaning'.[64] He then viscerally explains the absence of children in a person's life where 'on his death bed, no one offers him water to drink and after his death, there is none to remember. The joy of having a child mitigates all the bitterness and ordeals of life'.[65]

These sentiments on the significance of children in *Iqbal Dulhan* illustrate how the family was thought about and lived, and how profoundly fertility, reproduction and childbearing were the focus of that ideal. Reproduction has been acknowledged as a metaphor for survival, for linking past generations to an increasingly uncertain future. Reproduction and childbearing linger as pervasive themes in the novel. The role of reproduction in women's life opportunities, gender division of labour, dominant or subordinate gender relations and the relationship between social and economic forces has long been recognized in feminist and historical research. Studies on what has recently been called the 'politics of reproduction' have focused on important relations between activities such as childbirth and child-rearing and more public activities such as political debate and discourse.[66] *Iqbal Dulhan* shows the extraordinary status of

[63] Ibid., p. 85.
[64] Ibid., p. 85.
[65] Ibid., p. 85.
[66] Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett, 'Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives', *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): pp. 381–404; Gisela Bock and Pat Thanes, ed., *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of European Welfare States 1880–1950s* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, 'Reproduction as Politics' in *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 15–36; Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, 'The Politics of Reproduction', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20 (1991): pp. 311–343; Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider, *Festival of the Poor: Fertility Decline and the Ideology of Class in Sicily, 1860–1980* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Mary E. Fissell, 'The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation', *Representations* 87 (2004): pp. 43–81.

childbearing and children and of how people experienced the family. Reproduction and fertility were, therefore, essential to the common interests of the family and also of the religious community. The Quranic injunction was understood to be a 'solution' to the social 'problem' of an infertile marriage and therefore 'in complete accord with human nature'.[67]

The concept of 'legitimate polygyny', for different reasons, is also employed in *Gudar ka Lal*. Following the escape of Hasan Raza and Surayya to Lahore, the marriage of Yusuf Raza and Maqbool is arranged, much against the wishes of Yusuf, by the elders of the family, in particular by Khair Ali. Due to the lack of education of Maqbool, significant parts of the chapters of the novel are devoted to the incompetence of Maqbool in running the household efficiently, and her failure to maintain a clean and tidy house or to cook well for Yusuf and his family. She is also not very pious and does not offer her prayers regularly.[68] Moreover, she is friendly with Najaf Khanum, a woman who is the daughter of a *mirasan* (woman of a singing caste) and consequently not *ashraf*. This friendship is particularly offensive to Yusuf who insists to Maqbool that she should cease all interactions with her.[69] Maqbool, however, does not heed his advice and follows Najaf's suggestions on most crucial matters including how to maintain her marriage and other family relationships. These mannerisms of Maqbool lead to estrangement between her and Yusuf. The birth of a daughter, Sitara Jabeen, worsens the relations between Maqbool and Yusuf, and Maqbool is portrayed as a 'bad mother' ignorant of the baby's hygiene and diet.[70] Instead of being joyous at his daughter's birth, Yusuf Raza despairs over Maqbool's poor learning, fearing that their daughter will also be 'ignorant, ill-mannered, loquacious and disrespectful like her mother'.[71] The character of Maqbool echoes the argument that education of women was primarily to transform them into better mothers or wives or daughters, as people subjected to instruction by men. While the critique of the new patriarchy generated by male reformist rationality in which the educated woman performs her gendered roles with efficiency is crucial, it is also important to be mindful of some vistas this opened up for women. As

[67] Ahmad, *Iqbal Dulhan,* p. 85.
[68] Akbari Begum, *Gudar ka Lal,* pp. 70–89, 137–138.
[69] Ibid., p. 81.
[70] Ibid., pp. 139–142.
[71] Ibid., p. 138.

Afsaneh Najmabadi has argued, the gendered curriculum led to the 'transformation of woman from house to manager of the house' and the production of the woman of modernity provided both regulatory and emancipatory impulses.[72] Akbari Begum in *Gudar ka Lal* endorses this vision of women as house managers and more importantly, as mothers. One of the characteristics of the 'new family', expressed in *Gudar ka Lal,* is an increasing emphasis on motherhood and the role of women as child-rearers. Tasks that were hitherto otherwise dispersed to servants, fathers, neighbours, relatives and others, are now gathered up under the rubric of 'maternal responsibility'. Concomitantly, reproduction, one of many activities associated with women (and not exclusively with them), becomes the defining aspect of their characters and their lives.

The 'incompatible marriage' between Maqbool and Yusuf, due to differences in education, becomes the grounds for a second marriage. Yusuf shares his frustration with his cousin Hasan, and asks for help in raising his daughter. In response, Hasan writes a letter to Yusuf suggesting a second marriage 'because a home cannot be made without a woman'.[73] He also assures Yusuf that he and Surayya would continue to love him the way they have in the past but requests that he 'make some financial arrangements for Maqbool so that she is not dependent on anyone and a similar arrangement for your daughter so that she is not damaged'.[74] After receiving this letter, Yusuf is happy and the search for a second wife begins. It is important to note that the context for a second marriage in both *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Gudar ka Lal* is related to 'improving' the family and the establishment of an 'ideal' home. For both Ahmad and Akbari Begum, they are legitimate rationale for a second polygynous marriage. In *Iqbal Dulhan,* child *bearing* is crucial to 'complete' the marriage, and reproduction becomes the essential act of continuity for the religious group as much as for the individual or the family, and in *Gudar ka Lal,* child *rearing* is emphasized and polygyny is presented as a 'solution' for an 'incompatible marriage' and 'ignorant mothering' born out of unequal educational opportunities for women.

In order to understand the family dynamics involved in polygyny, one would have to analyse historically the various constructions of

[72] Afsaneh Najmabadi, 'Creating an Educated Housewife in Iran', in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East,* ed., Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 91–125.

[73] Akbari Begum, *Gudar ka Lal,* p. 275.

[74] Ibid., p. 275.

parenting and marriage by men as well as women. The changes that occurred under colonial rule, such as the introduction of modern education, a bureaucratic framework and the rise of a professional class, transformed family relations often at high expense for women. The notion of an 'incompatible marriage' as employed in *Gudar ka Lal* clearly originates out of these social and cultural transformations. *Gudar ka Lal* shows that women were also willing to accept polygynous unions. An examination of the status of the first wife and the role of the second wife will highlight the subtle differences between Akbari Begum and Bashiruddin Ahmad on the question of polygyny.

The relationship between the first and the second wife

The resolution of animosity between the first and the second wife is the prominent plot in both *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Gudar ka Lal*. Ahmad made his case for 'legitimate polygyny' when discussing the *iqrarnama* of the first marriage proposal. Later in the novel, a similar situation is created when Iqbal Mirza and Zaibunnisa, his wife, are unable to have children. As a result, Iqbal Mirza starts thinking about a second marriage as a 'solution' to the problem of childlessness. This process is characterized by anxiety and torment for Iqbal Mirza. But gradually Iqbal Mirza considers the idea of polygyny more favourably. The novel depicts both Iqbal Mirza and his wife caught up in the agony which would lead to a second marriage. After experiencing considerable strain, Iqbal Mirza is persuaded to take a second marriage on the advice of a friend. Not surprisingly, the second marriage is a psychological and emotional shock for Zaibunnisa and she is taken ill for months. As news of Zaibunnisa's ill-health spreads amongst the family, her maternal grandfather visits and exhorts her to 'adjust' and 'reconcile' to the emergent situation. Interestingly, it is religion that provides the soother to ameliorate relations between Iqbal Mirza and Zaibunnisa, and most importantly a foundation for cordial settlement between Iqbal Mirza, Zaibunnisa, and the second wife. Zaibunnisa's grandfather is a noted maulavi of the city and gives her a brief sermon on religious duty and suffering. Referring to *shan-e ubudiyat* or 'devotion to Allah', he says, 'O daughter, to take the misfortune to this extent over oneself is not commensurate with the requirements of *'shan-e ubudiyat'*. Grief neither defers affliction nor ameliorates it. You cannot

avert misfortune by feeling misfortune'.[75] Exalting the glory of Allah, he explains that:

> all the relations of this world are just superfluous, true love should only be for Allah. . .and whatever afflictions we face in this world are all from Allah. We have no control over them; a misfortune is a precursor to relief. We do not like it because we do not understand the secret behind it.[76]

Zaibunnisa's grandfather then pacifies and alleviates her pain by comparing her grief to that of other women in the neighbourhood and the wider community. He says that her polygynous marriage is better than divorce or widowhood. Furthermore, he insists that her situation is better than that of other co-wives who live in extreme poverty. Reiterating his calls for *shan-e ubudiyat,* he asks his granddaughter not to express anguish over an unpleasant situation, since it is against *ubudiyat* and piety. He asks her to build forbearance and fortitude, to fight her circumstances and to develop detachment, for 'just as the world is temporary, its happiness and grief are also transient'.[77] The sermon has a profound impact on Zaibunnisa and she starts contemplating her situation. She realizes her folly and the dangers of holding bitterness and distrust towards Iqbal Mirza. In letters between husband and wife, reconciliation is discussed and Zaibunnisa eventually forgives Iqbal Mirza. After the grandfather's sermon, Zaibunnisa, Iqbal Mirza and the second wife gradually develop an amiable relationship. Iqbal Mirza and his second wife have children together, and Zaibunnisa becomes almost a second mother to them. The novel ends when the tensions have been pacified between all three of them to show a tranquil home where the 'problem' of childlessness has been tackled through polygyny and every character is content with their marital life.

The grandfather's sermon emphasizes the religious duty of women in marriage where they are the paragons of patience and endurance. This emphasis on the religious duties of the virtuous wife has been documented in other instances amongst the Muslim community. Ghulam Ahmad, leader of the Ahmadiyya Movement stressed the virtues of patience, acquiescence and piety, when faced with adversity, in the education of women.[78] Compared with *Iqbal Dulhan,* in *Gudar ka*

[75] Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Iqbal Dulhan,* p. 225.
[76] Ibid., p. 226.
[77] Ibid., p. 228.
[78] Avril Powell, 'Duties of Ahmadi Women: Educative Processes in the Early Stages of the Ahmadiyya Movement', in *Gurus and their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements*

Lal, religion has a lesser role in developing a friendship between the first and the second wife. To a large extent, Akbari Begum supplants religiosity by education and thus it is the role of the educated second wife who must attend to the conflicts in the home and resolve them through her insight gained by education. After consulting his cousins, Hasan and Surayya, Yusuf marries Mehr Jabeen. Unlike Maqbool, Mehr Jabeen is shown to be educated and uncommonly intelligent. As we move ahead in the story, Mehr Jabeen proves to be an 'ideal' second wife. She works to remedy the estranged conjugal relationship between her husband Yusuf and Maqbool. Acting as the arbiter in the marriage, she hopes to renew Yusuf's affection for Maqbool and also establish an intimate friendship herself with Maqbool.[79] In addition to improving marital ties between Maqbool and Yusuf, Mehr Jabeen also assumes the responsibility of raising and educating Sitara Jabeen. While Maqbool is incapable of taking care of her own daughter, Mehr Jabeen is exceptionally attentive to her etiquette and decorum. She subscribes to the journal *Phool* (Flower) for her and reads out columns from other journals like *Sharif Bibi* (Respectable Woman).[80] She also divides her day into a schedule and gives lessons in basic arithmetic, Urdu, Persian, the Quran and the activities of sewing, drawing and cooking.[81] In the character of Mehr Jabeen, Akbari Begum presented what she considered to be the 'new woman'. *Gudar ka Lal* reconstitutes the woman of modernity as an organized and efficient mother, the educated woman who was well versed in cooking, sewing, the Quran and the languages of Urdu and Persian. What is unusual in the novel is that instead of a monogamous companionate marriage, the 'new woman' occupies the fragile status of a second wife aspiring for friendly relations with the first wife.

The notion of friendship advocated in *Gudar ka Lal* evinces direct comparison with *Iqbal Dulhan.* The ideal of a perfect polygynous marriage based on friendship between the first and the second wife is depicted in both novels. The range and depth of questions and issues expressed in *Gudar ka Lal,* however, are different and

in Colonial India, ed., Anthony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 129–155.

[79] Akbari Begum, *Gudar ka Lal,* pp. 306–311, 334–335, 344–353.

[80] Ibid., p. 283. *Phool* was started by Mumtaz Ali in 1910 and edited by Nazr Sajjad Hyder, whereas *Sharif bibi,* founded in 1910, was edited by Fatima Begum, daughter of Mahbub Alam, editor of *Paisa Akhbar.* Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars,* pp. 120, 148–149, 180, 269, 290.

[81] Ibid., pp. 303, 305.

more widespread than those in *Iqbal Dulhan*. *Iqbal Dulhan* is centred entirely on child-bearing and fertility, while *Gudar ka Lal* introduces to the discourse of polygyny issues of education of women and their autonomy, compatibility between men and women in marriage, and the raising of children. Despite this difference, the treatment of polygyny in *Iqbal Dulhan* is more humane than that in *Gudar ka Lal*. The plot is resolved around the amelioration of suffering of the first wife, and friendship between the co-wives results from the generosity of the first wife whereas *Gudar ka Lal* leaves no impression of the possible distress and affliction caused to Maqbool due to polygyny. By contrast, the grief of Maqbool is expressed by the liberal consciousness of Mehr Jabeen. The words '*haq*' (right) and '*huqooq*' (rights) appear frequently in conversations between Mehr Jabeen and Yusuf Raza. Mehr Jabeen asserts the rights of the first wife when discussing her relationship with Maqbool:

> Sir, I am a woman and very familiar with the heart of another woman. If you were to marry again, I would be bitter with envy and shame. She is the first wife and I am the cause of her grief and pain. All that I am entitled to is actually hers and she has become the outsider. Even her child is in my care. Her life is becoming increasingly bitter. Only your affection can act as a balm for her wounded heart. I would feel sorry for myself if I, as a woman, were unaware of her predicament. If I can't wish relief for a fellow woman, then I am not deserving of being a woman.

Continuing her conversation, Mehr Jabeen says:

> Yusuf, wouldn't it be displeasing to God if I seize everything that you have in your possession including your relationships and your child. And I remain happy when awake and sleep at peace during the night. And in the same house, there is another woman who also has the same rights as I have. Indeed, as the first wife she has more rights than me. But neglectful of everything, she spends her nights restlessly in worried sleep and her days in agony and anguish. And there is no one to enquire about her well-being. No, no, I will never tolerate this.[82]

This plea of Mehr Jabeen, clearly the voice of Akbari Begum, encapsulates multiple dilemmas that confronted women reformers when they addressed the question of polygyny. The rights of both the first and the second wife had to be balanced in a deeply polarizing situation. For Akbari Begum, a discourse of conjugal rights of both wives was the only innovative way to challenge male supremacy in a

[82] Ibid., p. 347.

polygynous marriage, and also foster care and intimacy between the two wives. Throughout the novel, Mehr Jabeen maintains her gestures of amiability and friendliness towards Maqbool despite Maqbool's indifference and hostility to her efforts. The final reconciliation between Maqbool and Mehr Jabeen occurs at the death of Maqbool's friend, Najaf Khanum.

The character of Najaf is crucial in understanding the argument about the education and tutoring of a girl child that Akbari Begum built in *Gudar ka Lal*. Towards the end of the novel, Najaf is shown having been taken incurably ill. Najaf then decides to disclose to Maqbool her true feelings and to tell her about her past. She reveals that she had all along been conspiring to destroy her marriage and says that her father, even though he grew in a *sharif* family, was not raised well and often socialized with vagrants in the neighbourhood wasting his life to gambling. To improve his ways, he was married to a *sharif* woman. The marriage stabilized him but only temporarily. Soon he returned to his earlier habits, developed an illicit relationship with another 'low born' woman who gave birth to her and her elder sister. When Najaf was one year old, this woman started loving another man, and eloped with him. On the other hand, Najaf's father too became involved again, with a member of a *mirasan*, who now lived with her father, and who brought her up. As Najaf was under her care and control, she remained totally deprived of education and good tutoring. Najaf's father worked with Khair Ali and thus she had a chance to be mostly with Maqbool at her house. She became infatuated with Hasan Raza, and after being snubbed by him and her failure in her overtures, she turned to Yusuf Raza. There too she failed miserably. Meanwhile, the family arranged Maqbool's wedding to Yusuf Raza. Najaf reveals that this enraged her and she grew excessively jealous of Maqbool, and plotted to destroy their marriage. To remove any possibility of suspicion, she then feigned to be more friendly and sincere to her. Maqbool thus acted totally on her advice. At the end of her disclosure, Najaf seeks forgiveness from Maqbool and suggests her to trust Mehr Jabeen and act on her advice as she had hitherto done with her.[83]

This disclosure by Najaf followed by her death shocks Maqbool and she becomes bedridden for quite some time. During her illness, Mehr Jabeen attends to her needs and takes care of her, which enhances Maqbool's appreciation for Mehr Jabeen's sincerity.

[83] Ibid., pp. 576–581.

Thereupon, following her recovery, both Maqbool and Mehr Jabeen live together as true sisters and friends. In Najaf's character the novelist highlights the prejudices that were integral to the reformist agenda of women's education. Education was meant to define the acceptable social space for freedom for the modern woman and this space was to include only the *ashraf* community, not the mean and selfish *mirasans*. An educated woman preserved her *sharafat* by self-policing her interaction and associating herself only with *sharif,* educated women. The 'incompatible marriage' in *Gudar ka Lal*, born out of inequities in education, thus turned marriage into a space for the contestation of the norms of *sharafat.*[84] *Sharafat* thus constitutes the central aspect of the discourse of polygyny. The issue of marital incompatibility between men and women could be cracked through the second wife, an idealization of *sharafat,* who vociferously demands rights and education for women and also upholds polygyny by making room for the conjugal ties between her husband and his first wife. Much like the discourse on sati in colonial India, we note that contradiction and ambiguity are striking features of the debate on polygyny. Moreover the difference between *Iqbal Dulhan* and *Gudar ka Lal* demonstrates that gender roles, as propagated in early twentieth century Urdu fiction, were not the same and could by no means be considered fixed, even at the prescriptive level. Nevertheless, there was also unequivocal and categorical criticism of polygyny and one such voice was that of Nazr Sajjad Hyder.

Rejection of polygyny

Nazr Sajjad Hyder was active in the women's movement throughout her life and often expressed her concerns in prominent women's journals. In addition to Urdu journalism, she wrote numerous Urdu novels including *Hirman Nasib* (The Unfortunate One) in 1920, *Surayya* in 1930 and *Janbaz* (Daredevil), which was serialized in the journal

[84] Akbari Begum did not support polygyny outside the boundaries of *ashraf* community. In one instance in *Gudar ka Lal,* Khair Ali, the male patriarch, has an affair with the domestic help of the household. He marries her much to the dismay and sadness of his first wife, Khairunnissa. His actions are treated by contempt by everyone in the family, in particular Yusuf. Eventually, his second wife runs away with jewellery and clothes. Khair Ali realizes his mistake and discovers the 'difference between *sharif* (respectable) and *khandani* (high ancestry) wives and *awara* (vagabond) and *zaleel* (low/contemptible) women', *Gudar ka Lal,* p. 255. For details of the whole affair, see pp. 244–255.

Ismat in 1918–1919 and published as a book in 1935.[85] Nazr Sajjad's concern for the family enunciated a radical difference. In the preface to her novel *Akhtarunnisa,* she summarized some of the major problems of the family as follows:

> The evils of an unplanned and purposeless second marriage, the illiterate second wife's unkind treatment of their step children, the educated girls' forced obedience to their illiterate step-mothers, the fathers' negligence of the needs of their children from their first wives after their second marriage, the arrangement of the marriages of their daughters in an illiterate family on their illiterate wives' advice, the women's sufferings in an illiterate milieu, the young widows' efforts to overcome their difficulties by struggling to get good education.[86]

These were the issues which she also raised time and again in her writings in *Tahzib-un Niswan.*[87] She attributed her concern to the larger effect polygynous marriages created in the community, namely that: 'hundreds, nay even thousands, of women of our community have endured these sufferings. Thousands of our helpless children who had lost their mothers were caught in troubles at the hands of these illiterate and cruel step-mothers'.[88]

Ah-e-Mazluman contains two parallel stories each depicting a situation of polygyny. Neither story ends tragically but none of them close with friendship between the husband and the co-wives. The plot revolves around two households, one is that of Deputy Sahib, and the other is that of Munshi Hidayatullah. The novel opens with Deputy informing his wife, Saltanat Ara, about his transfer to the town of Rawalpindi from Ludhiana, the town of residence of Deputy and his wife. He specifically asks his wife to leave for Agra, where her family resides while he arranges basic living facilities at Rawalpindi. Meanwhile, in the second household of Munshi Hidayatullah, we are introduced to his wife Abadi Begum and her daughter-in-law Zubaida, and his son, Azmatullah. Azmatullah has two sisters and one brother, Shafiullah. Munshi Hidayatullah is the patriarch of the family. In this family, Zubaida is severely ill-treated by her mother-in-law, Abadi

[85] For a discussion of her novels, see Shaista Suhrawardy, *Critical Survey,* pp. 103–106.

[86] Nazr Sajjad Hyder, *Hawa-e Chaman mein Khema-e Gul,* ed., Quratulain Hyder (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2005), p. 3.

[87] *Tahzib un-Niswan* was started in Lahore in 1898 by Saiyid Mumtaz Ali. He and his wife Muhammadi Begum (d. 1908) co-edited the journal. Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars,* pp. 73, 75, 110, 118–120, 122, 133.

[88] Nazr Sajjad Hyder, *Hawa-e Chaman mein Khema-e Gul*, p. 3.

Begum, to the extent that she is forced to live in the small room outside the main house which is also used for storage and as a shed for animals. The stories of these two households accentuate the cruelty of husbands towards their wives and aim to intensify the exclusion and alienation experienced by the first wife.

In the family of Munshi Hidayatullah, Abadi Begum decides to arrange a second marriage for her son to her wealthy niece Khursheed Begum. This is borne out of her malice towards Zubaida and a desire to acquire a wealthier status through the son's marriage to a rich family.[89]

Meanwhile in the family of Deputy, Saltanat Ara moves to live with her family in Agra. After a few days, she is distressed and reveals to her sister, Tamkenat Ara, that her husband has stopped writing letters and has ceased all contact with her. Worried, she decides to leave Agra and comes to Rawalpindi with her son Fazlur-Rahman and her two domestic helps. When she reaches Rawalpindi, she discovers that her husband has had a second marriage to a woman named Zarrin Jaan.[90] Both Saltanat Ara and Zarrin Jaan live together in the same house with much bitterness and angst amongst them. After a few days, Zarrin Jaan falls ill and insists that she live separately from Deputy's wife. Deputy manages an independent living arrangement for her in an adjacent house, and divides his time between the two wives. For the most part, his feelings are for Zarrin Jaan. While the two wives dislike each other, Saltanat Ara pretends friendship in front of everybody.

In the first household, Munshi Hidayatullah dies and the family plunges into a financial crisis. To escape penury and its stresses, Khursheed Begum and Azmatullah leave to stay at Khursheed begum's family and have a daughter together. Within a few days of childbirth, however, Khursheed suffers from severe post-delivery ailments and dies. Afterwards, Azmatullah returns to his father's house. Throughout this time, he has not kept in touch with his mother or his siblings. Faced by the strain of poverty, the health of both Abadi Begum and Azmatullah starts to wane to the extent that they become bedridden. Zubaida returns to take care of them and moved by Zubaida's compassion, Abadi Begum realizes her mistake in marrying

[89] Nazr Sajjad Hyder, Ah-e-Mazluman, in *Hawa-e-Chaman Mein Khema-e Gul,* ed., Quratualain Hyder (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2004), (reprint), p. 375.
[90] Ibid., p. 378.

off Azmatullah. Zubaida forgives Abadi Begum and her son, and the monogamous marriage of Zubaida and Azmatullah is restored.[91]

Meanwhile, in the Deputy's house, Saltanat Ara's health also declines rapidly. Concerned for her isolation and her well-being, her brother-in-law, Rashid Malik travels to Rawalpindi and escorts her back to Agra. Saltanat Ara moves back to live with her family while Deputy is married and living with Zarrin Jaan. Meanwhile, there is a robbery at Deputy's house in which he is assaulted by the robbers. A financial crisis is created when Deputy is unable to work due to injuries incurred during the attack. In the climax of the novel, Zarrin Jaan flees the house with jewellery and money. When Saltanat Ara discovers that Deputy is in poor health and in penury, she volunteers to help. Saltanat Ara's care and generosity renews Deputy's affection and regard for her and they gradually return to their earlier married life.

Nazr Sajjad's position in *Ah-e-Mazluman* sets her apart from Bashiruddin Ahmad and Akbari Begum, both of whom we have considered so far. The idea of polygyny as 'Islamic' is not entertained at all and the happiness of the home is established only when the second wife is ousted. Instead of friendship, there is bitterness and misunderstanding between the first and the second wife. Polygyny is absolutely rejected, and at the end of the novel, Nazr Sajjad makes a plea on 'behalf' of first wives and women. Referring to polygyny as an 'illegitimate marriage', she described its prevalence amongst Muslims as a 'blizzard' and denounced the community for not paying enough attention, for 'there are numerous leaders and reformers in the community but nobody is concerned about its prevention'.[92] She also criticized the discourse of 'adjustment' that was common to the rhetoric of polygyny:

> Our truthful reality is that 'oppressor hits and does not let us wail'. The injunction for us is 'we oppress, you endure. We hit, you do not weep nor utter a word of censure. Just combust and crush inside but don't wince. . . .' We obedient, ill-treated ones even agree to this and do not mention our grievances and demands, which are our rights. In fact we think that it is inappropriate or disrespectable. When it becomes excruciating, then we forbear very quietly with a sigh. In such a state, what can we ourselves do? Therefore, it is a humble request of not only hundreds but thousands of heartbroken women to our honest, sincere fathers. Our true brothers! For God's sake, have mercy

[91] Ibid., pp. 393–396.

[92] Nazr Sajjad Hyder, Ah-e-Mazluman, in *Hawa-e-Chaman Mein Khema-e Gul,* ed., Quratualain Hyder (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2004), (reprint), p. 448.

on us and first and foremost, before anything else, take note of us. Then we will also call you reformers. Otherwise, what does it matter to us how many reforms you bring? Our lives are getting burned, crushed and destroyed.[93]

The angry rhetoric of *Ah-e-Mazluman* challenges the overwhelming image of Muslim women during the colonial period as passive, silenced by the nationalist discourse and the patriarchal Muslim male elite.[94] Unfortunately, South Asian historiography has almost completely ignored the strategies Muslim women employed to negotiate power in their everyday life and to resist structures of domination within their social worlds.[95] We need to recognize and grasp the dynamism and multiplicity of their subversive actions and upset their hegemonic representation of muteness and inaction. In fact, *Ah-e-Mazluman* can be considered representative of a large number of active Muslim women at this time. *Ah-e-Mazluman* was published around 1912 and the fifth All India Muslim Ladies Conference of 1918, held in Lahore, issued one of the first public declarations against polygyny. The conference was attended by almost four hundred women from a large number of cities including Lahore, Allahabad, Lucknow, Aligarh, Bulandshahr, Delhi, Meerut, Bhopal, Peshawar, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Sialkot, Rawalpindi and Jammu.[96] An address given by Jahan Ara Shahnawaz at the conference called the custom of plural marriages one of the most shameful acts of oppression in Islam and a practice that was increasing among the best educated and most influential class of young Muslims.[97] The speech was met with applause by other women at the conference and one of the attendees even called for legislation to abolish polygyny, much like sati. But Jahan Ara had to write a second address in the press explaining her position after she was accused of insulting Islam and speaking under the influence of

[93] Ibid., pp. 448–449.

[94] For an analysis of nationalist and colonial discourse towards Muslim women in colonial Bengal, see Mahua Sarkar, *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008).

[95] For an exploration of everyday forms of resistance by women in South Asia, see Anindita Ghosh ed., *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).

[96] Marguerite Walter, 'The All India Moslem Ladies Conference', *Muslim World* 9, 2 (April 1919): p. 169. Also see Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars,* pp. 145–146, 283–291.

[97] Jahan Ara mentions this conference only briefly in a paragraph in her autobiography saying that the resolution was passed unanimously and 'brought about a storm of protest and a number of other articles appeared in the papers calling me all sorts of names'. Jahan Ara Shahnawaz *Father and Daughter: A Political Autobiography* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), reprint, pp. 47–48.

Christian missionaries and modern education.[98] Outside the literary debate, Sultan Jahan Begum of Bhopal also engaged in the debate over women's status in Islam and believed that polygyny was acceptable under conditions of infertility of the first wife or an 'incompatible marriage'.[99] The debates in literature therefore were not isolated from public activism but were expressions of common concerns.

The novels of Akbari Begum, Bashiruddin Ahmad and Nazr Sajjad Hyder are important for an understanding of gender history in colonial India. Their discourse of polygyny demonstrates subtle differences not only between men and women but also amongst women. These disagreements reveal to us the critical and interpretive characteristics of the commentaries and highlight the urgency of historicizing the debate on polygyny. This demonstrates that marriage, like other aspects of society, was subject to shifts in historical conditions and Muslim men and women enunciated different types of arguments to challenge and criticize their social and familial norms.

Late nineteenth century religious pamphlets and initial twentieth century novels represent two sites of discourses that reveal different types of knowledge about the family. They provide multiple lenses to examine polygyny. Religious pamphlets employed discourses based on principles of natural science and history to explain a practice sanctioned in Islam, while novels and fiction, on the other hand, reflected the anxieties and dilemmas of lived experiences and stories of men and women caught up in polygyny.

Conclusion

The political transition in India from the time of the Mughals to British colonial rule resulted in a basic religious reorientation among Indian Muslims. This reorientation involved a fundamental change in religious thought and organization as well as proclamation of various processes of reinterpretation and revival. In the nineteenth century, the issue of polygyny was argued in the context of the history and tenets of Islam, in particular, the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Social and political conditions under colonial rule further effected

[98] Marguerite Walter, 'The All India Moslem Ladies Conference', *Muslim World* 9, 2 (April 1919): pp. 172–174.

[99] Siobhan Lambert Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage: Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam of Bhopal* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 144–155.

significant transformations in the discourse on polygyny. After the establishment of British government, Indian Muslims, especially those who had served the Mughal rulers, had to come to terms with the realities, rules and institutions of the changed political climate. As they evolved into a professional class claiming the *ashraf* position, one of the guarantees of 'respectability' and 'Islam' was the home and the domestic space.[100] Family lineage and descent constituted this *sharafat*. The concern with procreation, as seen in the writings of both Sayyid Ahmad and Bashiruddin Ahmad, and continuation of the family line, was a marker of respectability for the *ashraf* class. Childbearing was necessary to maintain a living memory of *sharif* and high parentage. Polygyny in an infertile marriage can thus be seen as a process that allowed *ashraf* families to preserve their status and affirm their ancestry and family heritage.

The unequal rise of education and the higher presence of educated men compared with women also affirmed polygyny. Akbari Begum believed that polygyny could resolve the dilemma of an 'incompatible marriage', caused by a discrepancy in education between the husband and the first wife. Marriage to an educated second wife would ensure that the house is efficiently maintained, that children are well brought up and most importantly the boundaries of *sharafat* are not subverted.

There was certainly a rebellion against the observation that polygyny could be helpful and constructive for familial happiness. This is best illustrated in the writings of Nazr Sajjad Hyder who refused to imagine any possibility of the establishment of an amicable home through polygyny. At the level of social action, the public declaration against polygyny at the All-India Muslim Ladies Conference of 1918 held in Lahore encapsulates the sentiment of Nazr Sajjad Hyder. In fact, she was one of the most active members at that conference, and decades later she nostalgically remembered that she had persuaded women at the conference to sign a pledge whereby they agreed that they would

[100] Margrit Pernau has argued that from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Muslim public opinion shifted concern towards the personal, and emphasized the regeneration of the individual through the exemplary life of the individual Muslim, in particular of the wife and the daughter. Margrit Pernau, 'From a 'Private' Public to a 'Public' Private Sphere: Old Delhi and the North Indian Muslims in Comparative Perspective', in *The Public and the Private: Issues of Democratic Citizenship,* ed., Gurpreet Mahajan and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), pp. 103–129.

not arrange the marriage of their daughters to those men who were already married 'even if they were kings'.[101]

However what intrigues me is that when Saliha Abid Husain reflected back on her own life, in particular her marriage to Abid Husain in 1933, she saw her 'ideal' in Mehr Jabeen of *Gudar ka Lal*, the prototype of the educated second wife. The first marriage of Abid Husain took place in 1917 and he felt that it was 'incompatible' and forced onto him. His father pressured him to remarry when the first marriage produced no children. Abid Husain, however, ignored his father's demands and left for Europe to pursue higher education. Upon his return, his father again insisted on a second marriage but Abid Husain had no desire for children and considered polygyny inappropriate. Abid Husain contemplated a second marriage only when he felt deprived of all pleasures of marital life, in particular, companionship, domesticity and love.[102] When Saliha Husain received from him the offer of marriage, she deliberated as follows:

> It is likely that he wants to marry on the insistence of his father to produce a child. This is my insult. Does a girl have no personality of her own? Doesn't she have a worth of her own? Doesn't she have a right to be loved by herself? Is she merely an instrument for furthering a lineage? And then, what will happen to that self of mine, who in her assessment was even now a supporter of women's rights and wanted to propagate them through her pen. Should I grab the rights of another woman! No, no, how can it be![103]

Husain's doubts and dilemmas were cleared when she furtively read Abid Husain's letters to her sister-in-law. She discovered that Abid Husain was opposed to polygyny, that he had already obtained permission for this marriage from his first wife, that he would not legally divorce his first wife, that he would take responsibility for her and that no decision would be made until Saliha Husain agreed to the marriage.[104] Abid Husain's letters gave Saliha Husain the confidence to make the decision in favour of the marriage, and later in her life, she regarded Shafat, Abid Husain's first wife, as her sister and friend. Saliha Husain writes that 'for years, there was only one relation left between me and her: that of sisters. . .both of us had forgotten every

[101] Nazr Sajjad Hyder, '*Islah-e Rasoom ke Mashware*' in *Guzeshta Barso ki Baraf* (The Snows of Yesteryears), ed., Qurratulain Hyder (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2007), p. 381.
[102] Saliha Abid Husain, *Silsala-e Roz-o Shab*, pp. 149–151.
[103] Ibid., p. 115.
[104] Ibid., p. 118.

other relation'.[105] What is of great significance in Saliha Husain's marriage and also the narrative of *Gudar ka Lal* is that it reveals that the mimicry of Victorian norms and the emulation of companionate marriage was not the only trajectory of 'modern' marriage in India, that, as Tanika Sarkar has argued, 'the normative and moral horizons between the two cultural systems were so very different and distant that plain mimicry was plainly out of the question'.[106]

One of the most salient features about the discourse on polygyny was that it was never monolithic but was characterized by constant flux and oscillation between ideas of suffering and fortitude, education and marital rights, nature and religion, history and change. The results are eclectic. Furthermore, the question was never 'resolved' but, as the theological and fictional works demonstrate, polygyny came to be constituted as a 'problem' for modern, Indian Muslims. It was often retained and made compatible with other norms and ideas that educated men and women had learnt to cherish under the new dispensation. While some openly rejected and criticized the practice, others tried to render it more humane and wrote about ways of reforming it. Polygyny thus became the umbrella under which many familial issues were brought together and discussed.

[105] Ibid., p. 218.

[106] Tanika Sarkar, '*Strishiksha* or Education for Women', in Mary E. John ed., *Women's Studies in India: A Reader* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 321.