

Urdu Women's Magazines In The Early Twentieth Century

by Gail Minault

READERS of **Manushi** know that it not only describes the realities of women's lives but also seeks to change those realities. It advocates rights and permits women to communicate with each other about their problems. **Manushi's** format and spirit are new, but it represents a long and distinguished tradition in Indian journalism that goes back into the nineteenth century.

Early Indian women's magazines, in a number of languages, championed women's education, condemned social customs that kept women subservient and encouraged women's self expression. As champions of women's rights, however, these publications have a mixed legacy. They portrayed the ideal woman as skilful wife and nurturing mother, educated but wholly domestic, the helpmate to the educated, middle class man. Education for women was seen as contributing to that ideal not as preparing women for careers outside the home (except for teaching), nor an independent existence. From a contemporary viewpoint, it is easy to see in this ideal of womanhood the basis for women's continued subordination within the patriarchal family. Examined in their historical context, however, these women's magazines were brave pioneers, expanding the frontiers of women's roles and consciousness at a time when those frontiers were severely limited.

I propose to examine this mixed legacy in the cases of several women's magazines in Urdu, publications that I read in the course of doing historical research on Muslim women in India in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Tahzib un-Niswan* of Lahore, founded in 1898, *Khatun* of Aligarh, which ran from 1904 to 1914, and *Ismat* of Delhi, founded in 1908, raised important social issues and helped enlighten and alleviate the isolation of women in *parda*, while promoting an ideal of competent domesticity. In so doing, these magazines were not very different from women's magazines founded by Hindu social reformers in Hindi, Bengali, and other languages. Patriarchy and social

gradually the number of subscriptions increased to some 300 or 400 after four years. Publishing a women's periodical was a difficult and certainly not lucrative enterprise, and the fact that *Tahzib* survived into the 1950s is due largely to the talents and energies of its founders.

Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935) was from a family with a tradition of religious learning; his father was in government service in the Punjab. As a youth, he had one year of schooling at the Deoband *madarsa* before

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reform were symbiotic, regardless of religious community.

Tahzib un-Niswan

Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and his wife, Muhammadi Begam, launched the Urdu weekly newspaper for women, *Tahzib un-Niswan* in 1898. *Tahzib* was not the first Urdu periodical for women, but it was the first to survive. The success of the newspaper was surprising, for when the couple began publishing it, they mailed it out free of cost to names on the civil list, hoping to enlist subscriptions. Many of their prospective subscribers responded by returning the paper to sender, often with obscenities scribbled on the label. It was not an auspicious beginning. After a few months, *Tahzib* had only 60 or 70 subscribers, but the couple persisted, and

going to Lahore for an English education. In Lahore, he became involved in religious controversy, at first simply listening to the debates among Christian missionaries, Muslims, and Arya Samajis that took place in public squares, but later joining in the debates himself. As an adult, he used his skill in debate to address his fellow Muslims on the subject of women's rights in Islamic law.

His work *Huquq un-Niswan* ("Women's Rights"), emphasised that the position of women in Islamic law was theoretically much higher than their contemporary status was in fact. The cause of this discrepancy, he felt, was adherence to false customs that had been given the force of religion. The key to the reform and advancement of the Muslim

community, therefore, was to combat women's adherence to superstitious customs, but also to challenge men's views concerning women's rights. Women are equal souls before god. Thus, keeping women in ignorance and isolation is not a requirement of Islam, and to think that it betrays a lack of understanding of religion as well as a fundamental mistrust of women, which is destructive of family life, of human love, and of all that the Prophet's message stood for in a dynamic, just society. To support his point, Mumtaz Ali argued in the clear and logical style for which he became known: "The question is: Does the ability to do things [requiring physical strength] give men true superiority or nobility or give the male sex exclusive claim to those qualities? Our reply to that question should be quite clear... Both sexes have nobility, excellence, and both are needed to complete the other... A donkey can carry more on its back than a man, but that does not mean that the donkey is superior to the man. By the same token, man cannot establish his superiority [over women] on the basis of this argument." *Huquq un-Niswan* (Lahore, 1898: 7-8)

But how could he best bring about the kind of change in attitude that he advocated? Writing a learned treatise such as *Huquq un-Niswan* would reach only a few, well educated Muslims. The answer, Mumtaz Ali decided, was to reach women with an enlightened message. They needed to know what rights they had in the *shariat*. They could inherit property, and therefore needed enough education to be able to manage it. Further, they needed to be aware of contemporary ideas concerning child rearing, health, nutrition, budgeting, etiquette, and so on.

Respectable Muslim women in the 1890s did not usually go out to school, but a number of *parda* observing families had a tradition of home instruction. What was missing was useful reading material. A woman who had nothing appropriate to read might relapse into illiteracy. A



Some pages from "Ismat"

newspaper written in simple Urdu, designed with women's needs in mind, would help make women better wives, mothers, homemakers, and more devout Muslims. Educated men whose desire for educated wives was emerging at that time, would also respond positively to a more enlightened home life, and their attitudes, too, might change.

Mumtaz Ali was aided in founding his women's newspaper by his wife,

Muhammadi Begam. This remarkable woman is usually viewed simply as her husband's help-mate, but she was a strong personality in her own right. She was educated at home, together with her numerous brothers, and when they went off to school, she continued to learn somewhat haphazardly from their textbooks. She learned to write letters in order to stay in touch with her sister when the latter married and moved away. She

managed her father's household and cared for the younger children when her stepmother was away visiting relatives. When she married, she continued her education under Mumtaz Ali's tutelage, even as they founded their journal. She mothered his two children from a previous marriage, managed his household, and eventually bore their own son. Muhammadi Begam also served as editor of *Tahzib un-Niswan* and was, in addition, the author of several novels, a cookbook, a manual of housekeeping, and books of etiquette. She died prematurely in 1908.

During its first decade, under Muhammadi Begam's editorship, *Tahzib* aimed at reaching the *parda* observing woman at home and meeting her need for useful reading matter and broadened horizons. Articles discussed education, household management, gave good advice to the daughter-in-law on how to get along with her mother-in-law, and so on. A constant theme was the reform and simplification of custom, the need to eliminate wasteful expenditure on rituals, dowry, ornaments. Mumtaz Ali's views on women's rights in Islamic law were also serialised in the paper.

Tahzib classified itself as a newspaper, so it carried a lot of news items, notices of women's meetings, of fundraising drives for schools, and summaries of speeches by women to women's organisations. The weekly format made possible a lot of give-and-take between the journal and its readers, in the letters to the editor section. One letter, for example, discussed the reasons why girls should learn English: "Nowadays, many girls are keen to learn English, but their parents are displeased by this. They feel that girls have no reason to learn English, since they are not going out to work in an office. They don't realise that boys who learn English also would like wives who know English. It is my opinion that this is the reason why so many unfortunate women sit home alone... Also, if they knew English, they could contact the men in their offices in event of an

emergency..." (*Tahzib un-Niswan*, 4 April 1907: 170.)

The style of this, and of the paper in general was straightforward and conversational. *Tahzib* struck a balance between popular format and reformist substance. It maintained a clarity of style with a content that was both practical and edifying.

Later volumes of *Tahzib* reflected women's increased level of education and variety of activities outside their homes. The style became somewhat more complex; the vocabulary expanded. Reports of women's organisations and speeches proliferated. In one such report, Mumtaz Ali commented: "Ever since the founding of the Muslim Ladies' Conference four years ago, we have been interested in it, and always hoped that it would be able to do something for reform in the community. I always thought, however, that it was premature... and a number of people thought I was against the conference for that reason. But I am its well-wisher... What do I mean when I say the conference is premature? I mean that a great deal of unusual and hard work will be necessary or it will not be successful." (TN, 6 April 1918 : 221-22.)

Other articles revealed that women were indeed receiving education in English as well as Urdu, and the paper printed the names of women passing their BAs, MAs, and medical degrees, with warm congratulations and exhortations to other readers to go and do likewise.

Articles began to appear on the contemporary political scene, the events of world war I, noncooperation, and *swadeshi*. Women started collecting funds for political purposes: the Khilafat movement and Turkish relief. In one appeal that combined these causes, Nazir Sajjad Hyder, wife of Syed Sajjad Hyder, herself an Urdu novelist and short story writer and the mother of the contemporary Urdu woman novelist, Qurratulain Hyder, urged : "I am not asking you to give rupees but... give up foreign cloth and wear only

swadeshi...The day is coming when we will be ashamed to go out without wearing *khaddar*. Instead of burning your foreign cloth, send it to the Smyrna [Turkish Relief] Fund to be given to Turkish women who need warm clothes for winter." (TN, 29 October 1921 : 689-94.)

Readers also sent in travel accounts and descriptions of the *haj* pilgrimage. Literary criticism appeared. And a number of younger women contributors began to take issue with the strictures of *parda*, with polygamy, and with unilateral divorce. By the 1930s, the readers of *Tahzib* had come a long way.

Tahzib overcame initial opposition and succeeded because it met a felt social need. Mumtaz Ali, after all, was not the only educated Indian Muslim male of his time who desired a more enlightened home life. Nor was Muhammadi Begam the only literate Muslim woman of her time who lacked a source of news and an outlet for self expression. *Tahzib* articulated an impulse for reform of custom, of religious observance, and of household practice that was essentially patriarchal. The desires and opinions of men were behind the effort, and the institution of *parda* and the subordinate position of women in the family were in no way challenged. Further, the emphasis on the reform of custom in favour of scriptural religion challenged a cultural realm in which women were relatively autonomous.

Still, Mumtaz Ali's attitudes, based on his published interpretation of Islamic law, were remarkably egalitarian and his partnership with Muhammadi Begam was a close and creative one. *Tahzib's* ideal of domesticity may now seem dated, but in the first decades of this century, its advocacy of women's education and of broader imaginative horizons for women in *parda* were in advance of the times.

Khatun

Another husband and wife who were active in the movement for women's education and who started a magazine for women were Shaikh Abdullah of Aligarh

(1874-1965) and Waheed Jahan Begam (1886-1939). Shaikh Abdullah was a convert to Islam who attended Aligarh College, established a law practice in that town, and married the educated sister of one of his classmates. In 1904, they started the Urdu monthly *Khatun* as the journal of the Women's Education Section of the All-India Muslim Educational Conference. Shaikh was the secretary of the Education Section, and the main purpose of the journal was thus to advocate schools for girls, especially the Abdullaha's project to found a girls' school in Aligarh.

The Abdullaha established Aligarh Girls' School in 1906, and by 1914 had raised money and built a hostel to transform their local school into a boarding school, with clientele coming from a wider area.

Waheed Jahan Begam devoted her energies to running the school and supervising the hostel. The school, which struggled to survive at first, later expanded to become the Women's College of Aligarh Muslim University.

Khatun provides important documentation for the history of Muslim women's education. The Shaikh exhorted his readers to found local associations to raise funds and start girls' schools. He recorded fundraising drives and his own speeches and reports to the annual meetings of the Muslim Educational Conference. In one particularly interesting editorial, cast in the form of a dialogue between himself (Editor) and a supporter of education (*Hami*), the Shaikh asked :

Editor : From your words, am I to understand that you are a firm supporter of women's education?

Hami: Why not? Anyone who opposes women's education in this day and age is either illiterate (*jahil*) or mad (*diwana*).

Editor : But not being opposed to women's education is quite a different matter from supporting it... I simply wanted to ask if you were truly a supporter of women's education, or whether you were



Shaikh Abdullah and Waheed Jahan Begam

simply among those who refrain from opposing it.

Hami: (frowning) Please repeat your question. I am not sure I understand.

Editor : *Janab!* I merely said that anyone who is a genuine supporter of women's education would want to support it by his actions, words, writing, and so

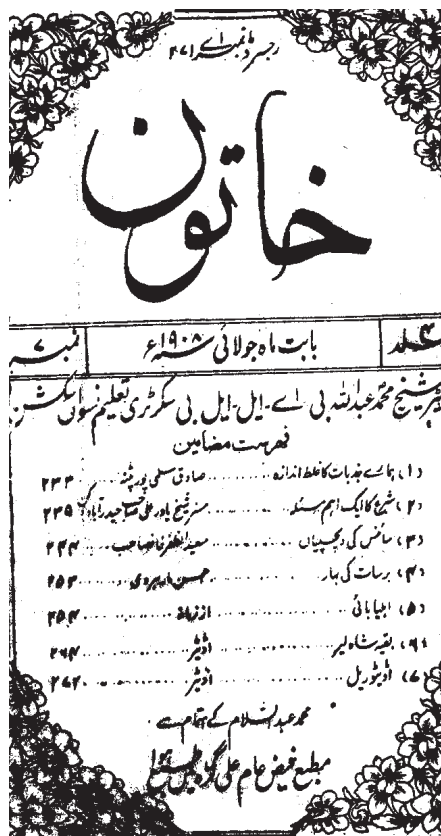
on. And if he had money, he would also support the effort with a donation.” (*Khatun*, August 1912 : 46-47.)

Waheed Jahan too gave an occasional speech or wrote about management of the school. In one speech at a meeting of Muslim women gathered to voice support for girls’ education, she mentioned that women in Turkey and Egypt were being educated and could hold meetings, and this had been beneficial to their societies: “When women meet among themselves, there will be more solidarity... Now there is a division between educated and uneducated women. Uneducated women, who do not go out, think that respectability is confined to the four walls of their houses. They think that people who live beyond those walls are not respectable and not worthy of meeting. But God has ordained education for both men and women, so that such useless ideas can be gotten rid of.” (*Khatun*, January 1906 : 7-8.)

The journal also contained much discussion of educational matters, curricula, the pros and cons of teaching English to women, the need for improved textbooks, the students’ need for fresh air and exercise (behind high walls so that *parda* could be maintained), reports of meetings of women’s associations and school committees, and speeches by women, including the Begam of Bhopal, the chief patron of Aligarh Girls’ School. Reporting on the Begam’s speech before the inaugural function of the hostel building in 1914, *Khatun* noted that the doors of the hall had stuck when she tried to open them, prompting her to quip that this symbolised the obstacles still facing Muslim girls’ education. (*Khatun* Feb.-March 1914 : 35, 44-54.)

Women’s views on education appeared in its pages, but *Khatun* was chiefly addressed to the members and patrons of the Muslim Educational Conference, that is, the educated elite of the Muslim community, largely men. Shaikh Abdullah wrote clearly and

persuasively in Urdu, but without many concessions to the need for a simplified style to reach a newly literate female readership. One exception to this



A title page of “Khatun,” 1908

observation simply proves the rule, for a wonderfully idiomatic article by one A.W.J. Begam from Delhi was in striking contrast to most of the other educational articles in the journal. “I have heard a lot of noise about the fact that the quest for

nothing. Everyone says that our *gari* [train/cart—the double meaning is intended] will reach its destination, but no one seems to be willing to hitch it to an engine, or a horse, or even a bullock and then everyone regrets that the cart is sitting in one place. If this keeps up, we will never get anywhere.” (*Khatun*, August 1904 : 41-44.)

Khatun’s purpose was to promote women’s education. Providing women with useful household information, tips on childrearing, and embroidery patterns was left to publications closer to the style of *Tahzib*. *Khatun* fulfilled its purpose, but in 1914, with the opening of the hostel, the Abdullahs had a great deal to do to run the boarding school, and so *Khatun* ceased publication.

Ismat

The third in this trio of early women’s magazines in Urdu is *Ismat* of Delhi, founded in 1908 by Rashidul Khairi (1868-1936), whose chief claim to fame was as an Urdu novelist. He was the nephew of another famous Urdu novelist, “Deputy” Nazir Ahmad (1830-1912). Rashidul Khairi, during his prolific career as a novelist, earned the nickname *musavvir-e-gham* (“portrayer of sorrow”) for his melodramatic and extremely popular stories about the tragic lives of oppressed women. His earnings from his novels helped him to finance *Ismat*, a monthly which was founded primarily as a literary journal, to encourage creative writing by women. It also contained a substantial amount of writing by Rashidul Khairi and

“Anyone who opposes women’s education in this day and age is either illiterate (*jahil*) or mad (*diwana*)”

knowledge has not reached Muslim women, and that they are not interested in education in any way. People make speeches at meetings and write articles in newspapers... But if you ask them what they have done to spread knowledge among women... the answer is simply

other men, articles designed to promote women’s education and the respectable domesticity so favored by social reformers of the day, whether Hindu or Muslim.

Reading Rashidul Khairi’s novels gives one a clue to his attitudes toward women, their education and

enlightenment. An early work, *Hayat-e-Saleha* or *Salehat*, is the story of the beloved and well educated daughter of an elderly man who, having lost his wife, remarries. The ignorant stepmother decides to marry off this daughter to her wastrel younger brother. Since her father agrees to the plan, the daughter also accepts it. She makes an exemplary wife and mother, but is unappreciated by her worthless husband. Her father eventually dies, and so does she. The heroine, Saleha, even though educated, is ill used by her father and husband, but she remains dutiful and uncomplaining. Many of Rashidul Khairi's heroines die, often of consumption. They are then honoured in death, unlike in life. One begins to see why he was dubbed "the painter of sorrow," and one suspects that the ghost of Rashidul Khairi lurks among today's Bombay film writers.

The first issue of *Ismat* contained stories, poems, several articles on education, one on housekeeping, a description of the Taj Mahal, and several letters of welcome. One of those letters was from Waheed Jahan Begam Abdullah; one of the poems was by Muhammadi Begam Mumtaz Ali. The issue also contained a statement of purpose: *Ismat* was a journal in Urdu for "respectable Indian women," which would contain edifying articles dealing with scientific and educational subjects, literature, and useful knowledge, but no political articles. It also aimed to "make the sanctuary sanctified" (*haram ki harmat qaim rakhna*) or "as the English saying goes, to make the home a castle," to "bring progress to the world of women," and to "advance the cause of women's literature." (*Ismat*, June 1908, appendix.)

If one couples the name of the journal (*Ismat* means purity or chastity) with its statement of aims, and compares these with the plots of Khairi's novels, one senses a unity of purpose in his literary endeavours. *Ismat* assumed the modesty, honour, and respectability, but also



A cover of "Ismat", February 1938

passivity, of its readers. It viewed women as the objects of a programme of amelioration. The home was to become a "sanctuary" (the double meaning of the word *haram* is significant); progress and enlightenment were to be brought to women.

Such a view of women is highly conventional. It coincides with the vision of women in Khairi's novels. No matter how well educated and competent his heroines may be, they are always dutiful,

even to the men who oppress them. They are victims, incapable of defending themselves because they are devoted to the overriding ideals of obedience and fidelity. Some women criticised Khairi for this aspect of his writings. In an example of the early literary criticism that appeared in *Tahzib un-Niswan*, a woman noted: "He captures women's idiom better than anyone... But his books, whose subjects deal with happenings that we see every day are not very realistic... [He shows]

women's weakness and inferiority, but this portrayal gives us nothing to build on or be proud of. It shows what should be changed without giving us any notion of how to get out of the situation... He doesn't really help anyone [by showing] women in a state of crying day and night." (TN, 9 July 1921 : 433-35)

To end the oppression of women, according to Rashidul Khairi, men had to undergo a change of heart. Consequently, in the early years of *Ismat*, unlike in *Tahzib un-Niswan*, there was little, if any, discussion of women's rights in Islam. Rather, the journal contained articles and stories designed to inform women about how to make their husbands' lives more comfortable, what sorts of difficulties they would encounter (and have to bear patiently) when they married and went to live with their in-laws, and so on.

In one article, entitled "Have Our Women Made Progress?", Rashidul Khairi outlined what he thought were important indicators of change: "Let us simply look at what are the differences between

important reason for the journal's emphasis on respectability : *Ismat* hoped to avoid the kinds of moral objections and attacks that other women's journals such as *Tahzib*, had met. In this, it was successful. *Ismat's* circulation by 1912 had reached 900, much better than *Tahzib's* during its fourth year of life.

To be fair to Rashidul Khairi, however, his concern for purity, honour, and respectability was not a facade. His morality was highly conventional, but to champion the cause of women's education, to urge women to express themselves in print, and to urge men to undergo a change of heart required a good deal of courage at that time.

An example of his writing, addressed to men, urging them to end their injustice to women is the following passage from *Tamaddun*, another one of his journals. The tone is typically lachrymose : "The story of women's rights is heartrending. Women are oppressed day and night and find no relief from their fate. Blessed will be that time when a spirit of sympathy [for

known as the All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference, meeting in Lahore, passed a resolution condemning polygamy. The resolution stated that: "...the kind of polygamy practised by certain sections of the Muslims is against the spirit of the Quran and of Islam, and that it is inimical to our progress as a community", and called upon women to exercise their influence to end the practice.

Rashidul Khairi, much to the shock of many loyal readers of *Ismat*, attacked the resolution : "We regret greatly that wives and daughters of respectable Muslims could agree to such a thing... I am not myself a supporter of polygamy, but for a Muslim meeting to make such a declaration, in the presence of non-Muslims [some Englishwomen were present] only brings hatred upon Islam and has a detrimental effect on the minds of young Muslim girls. It also goes against the meaning of the *shariat*." (*Ismat*, March 1918: 8.)

The women were astonished, because Rashidul Khairi had exposed the evils of polygamy in several of his novels and had made clear his own position that no man could do justice to more than one woman, in the spirit of the Quranic injunction. Yet, when women themselves addressed the problem and invoked the spirit of the Quran, as opposed to its letter, Rashidul Khairi fell back upon the letter, saying that since Islam permitted polygamy, it would not do for Muslim women to seek its abolition. A number of women criticised him for his inconsistency, and yet his stance is quite consistent with his position that men must be the reformers of society and the improvers of women, not women themselves. His position is thus internally consistent, whether or not one agrees with it.

Rashidul Khairi's writings overflow with sympathy for the oppressed women of the Indian Muslim community. He regarded himself as a champion of women's rights within the Islamic tradition, and for his time, he certainly was. It took

"Nowadays, women... recognise better the tenets of their religion, and that one of its most important commandments is to seek knowledge."

formerly and now in daughters and daughters-in-law. Nowadays, women realise that their duty is not simply to populate the world, but actually to bring about some betterment... There is no denying the fact that today's wives are trying to improve the condition of their homes. This is significant. They also recognise better the tenets of their religion and that one of its most important commandments is to seek knowledge." (*Ismat*, October 1912, 2-6)

The didactic purpose of *Ismat* was as clear as that of Rashidul Khairi's novels, and neither challenged traditional female roles or male authority. There was an

women] will spread [among men] upon the earth. Torment will change into paradise and sorrows will change into happiness. Even when going to their graves, husbands do not recognise the oppression they have visited upon their wives. Nor has news of the rights which Islam has given them reached women's ears." (*Tamaddun*, March 1913, cited in Rashidul Khairi, *Ismat ki Kahani* (Delhi 1936: 12.)

Rashidul Khairi would have been horrified, however, if women had started demanding their own rights. Confirmation of this point came in 1918, when the Anjuman-e Khawatin-e Islam, otherwise



Rashidul Khairi with his wife and grandchildren, 1933

courage to expose the social evils that he described in his works, such as polygamy and unilateral divorce. It took talent to do so and simultaneously to be one of the biggest bestsellers in the history of the Urdu novel.

The modern reader may find his characters stereotypical, his plots maudlin and repetitive, and his view of women condescending and patriarchal. But Rashid Khairi was a pioneer. He founded his journal to encourage women writers, and

it did so, giving rise to many who went on to write openly about subjects that he surely would have disapproved. *Ismat* moved to Karachi in 1947 and continued to appear from there until recently. Its pages contained the writings of many of the great Urdu women writers of the twentieth century.

Conclusions

The three Urdu women's magazines discussed here are only a few examples of the genre, though *Tahzib un-Niswan* and *Iswat* both had very long careers and hence provide the historian with a gauge of social and attitudinal changes over time. All three were started by men, two with the close collaboration of their wives. All three championed women's education and defined greater enlightenment for women in terms of competent domesticity rather than in terms of individual autonomy. When they addressed religious questions, they supported a scriptural standard rather than folk or customary practice, meaning that they played down women's rituals or condemned them as superstitious.

In setting up social norms for women, these journals defined those standards in terms that men could recognise. Women accepted such norms as well, but in the process may have surrendered some control over their own sphere. The legacy of these socially reforming journals is thus ambiguous. As women became educated and as they read these journals and became more aware of the external world and its values, their definition of what was acceptable, or respectable, was more closely controlled by what men thought. It took several generations before a newer standard evolve, but these early magazines at least gave women a place where their voices could be heard. □