

ZARINA BHATTY



Purdah

to

piccadilly

A Muslim Woman's Struggle
for Identity



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First published in 2016 by



SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd

B1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044, India
www.sagepub.in

SAGE Publications Inc

2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320, USA

SAGE Publications Ltd

1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP, United Kingdom

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd

3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Published by Vivek Mehra for SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, typeset in 10.5/12.5 pt Minion by Zaza Eunice, Hosur, Tamil Nadu and printed at Chaman Enterprises, New Delhi.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Name: Bhatti, Zarina.

Title: *Purdah to Piccadilly : a Muslim woman's struggle for identity* / Zarina Bhatti.

Description: Thousand Oaks : SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2015.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015039347 | ISBN 9789351508243 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9789351508236 (ebook) | ISBN 9789351508250 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Bhatti, Zarina. | Muslim women—India—Biography. | Feminism—India—History.

Classification: LCC HQ1170 .B4445 2015 | DDC 305.48/6970954—dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015039347>

ISBN: 978-93-515-0824-3 (HB)

The SAGE Team: Aditi Chopra, Saima Ghaffar, Megha Dabral and Vinitha Nair

Purdah
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I dedicate my memoir to my parents, Mohammadi Begum and Faridul Haq for their ability to accept change with grace.

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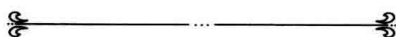
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Preface

Memoirs are usually written by distinguished persons such as scholars, philosophers, and artists, who have made important contributions to knowledge, art, and culture. I cannot claim any such distinction, and yet I have narrated my life and experiences from my long journey of 80 years. I have done so, suggested and motivated by my three daughters who believe that my life has been somewhat different from that of an average Muslim woman, as I struggled against the established social norms of my time and carved out my own identity. I also had a desire to record the massive socio-cultural changes that I have been witness to during the last century. India, after being established as a sovereign democratic state, launched a massive program of socio-economic development, questioning the caste system and traditional gender relationships. It gave itself a secular democratic constitution that guaranteed equality to all Indian citizens "irrespective of caste, creed, and sex."

In the following pages, I have described social and political upheaval of pre- and post-independence India and have reflected on the emergence of notions of socio-economic equality and social justice which attempted to demolish the caste, class, and gender boundaries. These notions, along with the environment of protest against the rigid and outdated social structure, affected not only the social fabric of the country but also individual aspirations and lifestyles.

I have also highlighted how the political changes in post-independence India and after the partition of the country affected the Indian Muslims who had been an integral part of Indian society and polity. They felt torn between their religious and cultural loyalties. Religious zeal pulled them toward Pakistan but they found themselves culturally more rooted in India. Under pressure, some decided to migrate to Pakistan, but many of them regretted their decision later as they felt alienated by the predominant Punjabi and Sindhi culture

and the language there. Those who stayed behind to preserve their roots went through the trauma of accepting a minority status in their country of origin, despite having made a significant contribution to India's struggle for freedom. These factors still have an unfortunate effect on the rising fundamentalism which is pulling the community toward more conservatism and separatism.

Even after 50 years, I cherish the memory of the day when I was sitting in the Royal Albert Hall and my name was called out. It was an international gathering of students, most of whom belonged to the privileged classes, including the royal families worldwide. I got up to receive my degree from the British Queen Mother, Queen Elizabeth, who was then the Chancellor of the University of London. I could not help recalling my humble past as the daughter of a middle-class family who had an illiterate grandmother and a mother who had no schooling and was taught only Urdu at home; as a child whose return to school was threatened at the beginning of every academic year; one who was discouraged at every stage from studying abroad to become a professor; who was ridiculed for having such high aspirations. But there I was, sitting in those royal surroundings, receiving a degree from the University of London. It was no dream. Those reading it today, including my grandchildren, will probably say, "So what? It is no big deal." But given my circumstances, it was a very big deal for me. I have explained why an ordinary event like the distribution of degrees at a university convocation had such importance for me and gave me a sense of achievement, and I have placed my personal experiences and struggles in the context of the then prevailing socio-cultural setting. These accounts may be viewed as a brief cultural history of that time. The prevailing social structure of the time when I was growing up was highly feudal and patriarchal. The society was socially and economically segregated on caste, class, and gender lines. The social structure was far more rigid than it is now; it left little room for individual deviations which, whenever occurred, were more severely disapproved, making individual aberrations more difficult. Indian Muslim society was no exception to this situation.

Despite the Muslim claims of Islam having an egalitarian ethos, the Indian Muslim society has been highly influenced by the dominant Hindu social structure. It practiced caste system analogous to the Hindu caste system with minor regional differences. It adopted the Hindu customs regarding gender relationships, arranged marriages, gender discrimination, legal rights, disapproval of widow remarriage,

and treating widows as accursed and placing many restrictions on their personal lives. Muslim society was harsh on women. It deprived them of education and kept them in seclusion, restricting any exposure to the outside world. It was considered to be virtuous to follow the prescribed social norms without any form of protest.

I have tried to record in some detail the functioning of the traditional social structure in the Oudh region, which was then the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh and now known as Uttar Pradesh (UP). The Oudh region of the erstwhile province was feudal and dominated by the Muslim landed gentry. Not only economically, but also culturally, that social structure started crumbling under the weight of the newly acquired ideas of social justice and socio-economic equality. I have been a witness to that process of change and my personal experiences and struggles to deal with that societal and familial environment reflect in the following narrative. By narrating my life experiences, I also wish to convey to my readers that it is important to have dreams and aspirations in order to grow, and have self-belief to pursue them.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Professor Pat Huckle, State University of San Deigo, California, for reading the earlier part of the manuscript and giving a positive feedback. I want to register my delight and thanks to my grandchildren, Daniyaal Khan and Layla Khan, for rescuing me whenever I got into trouble with the computer as I am not very computer-savvy. My eldest grandson, Arman Ghosh, while on a short visit to India, was also roped in to help nanna (grandmother) which he did with great patience.

Millions of thanks and a bagful of appreciation for my dear friend Dr Romila Thapar, for reading the manuscript and making suggestions despite her very busy life. I wish to thank Dr Saba Mahmood Bashir and am indebted to her for her detailed editing and positive suggestions to improve the quality of my manuscript. And last, but not the least, I thank Ms Sunanda Ghosh of SAGE Publications for offering the possibility of publishing it. I also wish to thank Ms Shreya Chakraborty for editing part of this manuscript and for further editing to Amrita, and record my thanks and appreciation to Elina Majumdar for being a great help in handling my somewhat imperfect manuscript, cheerfully and with patience.

I would like to record my appreciation and gratitude to a number of my friends and close relatives who kept my motivation alive, besides my daughters, Huma, Kiran, and Nikhat, for their continuous encouragement and support. I also would like to name my nephew Sohail Akbar, my sister Seemin, her husband Abdul Hai, my niece Kakul, and my friend and one-time colleague Dr Taisha Abraham whose support has been vital in my effort.

I sincerely apologize to all those who may have felt offended by any omissions or unintended remarks that I may have made in

the memoirs. I wish to assure them that I did not intend to hurt or misrepresent anyone. In the end, I would like people to remember me as a woman who was a humanist by faith, sociologist by profession, and a feminist by conviction.

Zarina Bhatti
Mussoorie

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1

The Background

My long journey from Lucknow to Royal Albert Hall in London began on 9 August 1933, when a baby girl was born to Faridul Haq and Mohammadi Begum, their firstborn. This baby was named Zarina (literally translated as ‘golden’). She was so underweight that her survival seemed unlikely; she not only survived, but also thrived and is still living (though not kicking) as an 80-year-old overweight granny.

As a firstborn, I was fondly welcomed by my parents, and especially by my grandmother, unusual for an Indian family where the birth of a girl brings gloom, particularly more so if she’s the firstborn. The reason for such an unusual welcome was because my grandmother did not have a daughter. She had become a widow at the tender age of 18, only two years after her marriage and did not marry again. My father was only six months old when my grandmother lost her husband. She yearned for a daughter. When my father got married and my mother became pregnant, my grandmother prayed for a girl child and her prayers were answered. My birth was a poignant response to her prayers. Although at the time of my birth my parents were living in Barabanki—a district town in UP—I was born in Lucknow, which had better medical facilities, as my mother was brought there for the delivery.

Both my parents belonged to the land-owning families of Rudauli, a Muslim-dominated *qasba*¹ in the erstwhile district of Barabanki. Former UP Chief Minister Mayawati had reorganized the districts during her first tenure in the year 2007, so Rudauli now falls in the district of Faizabad. Before Independence, UP was called the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (now Awadh). The Oudh region was

¹ A small town.

ruled by a dynasty of Muslim nawabs until the British took over. The Nawabs of Oudh¹ were famous for their leisurely, highly feudal lifestyle bordering on debauchery. Remnants of that culture persisted even till very recently in Lucknow and the *qasbas* of that region.

Iska to ulta dola wapas ayega,² my mother's oft-repeated refrain, because I was not at all inclined toward domestic chores, still echoes in my mind. Little did she know at that time that it would take 12 long years before my 'dola returned', when I divorced after 12 years of an unhappy marriage.

I do not have very clear memories of my early childhood but I do have this overriding memory that I never did anything right. My parents must have had a tough time bringing me up. During my growing-up years, there was much disapproval of any unconventional behavior, and a great deal of emphasis was placed on age-and-gender-specific socially prescribed conduct. This code of behavior was more rigidly applied to women and girls than to boys and men; society was more indulgent toward the deviant behavior of boys and men than toward that of girls and women and thus were the social sanctions less harsh for boys and men. I was forever corrected for what was considered unseemly behavior for girls, such as walking fast, jumping and running around, asking questions, talking loudly—"A woman's voice should not be heard in men's quarters" used to be the refrain—and so forth. I was constantly reminded that I was a girl and girls could not behave like boys.

Femininity was defined as having a delicate physique, a dependent nature, being quiet, docile, obedient, soft-spoken, unquestioning, non-argumentative, and accepting the gender-based code of behavior unconditionally. This conditioning of girls and boys started from almost infancy in India, indeed in the subcontinent. Little girls were fed on the ideal femininity model of being speechless, desire-less, submissive, obedient, serving, sacrificing, and pious persons whose entire purpose in life was to live and die as daughters, wives, and mothers, without even aspiring to have an identity of their own. On the contrary, boys were encouraged to play outdoor games, be aggressive, physically strong, have a big appetite, develop a commanding personality, and consider themselves to be superior to girls. We girls were even discouraged from having a healthy appetite for the fear of us getting fat, as slim figures were, even then, preferred in the marriage market.

² Her wedding palanquin will return the same day.

Girls were expected to eat one or, at the most, two chapattis and a fistful of rice, while boys were encouraged to eat at least three or four chapattis and two fistfuls of rice. I sometimes liked to have three chapattis, but would eat the third one with a strong sense of guilt. Luckily, despite this, I remained very slim throughout my youth.

One of the reasons for restricting food for girls may have been because we did not get much physical exercise. We were confined within the four walls of the house; even little girls were not allowed to go out of the inner courtyard to play. We girls were introduced to domestic activities from an early age and did not have much time to play around outdoors. The games that girls played were also different from the games that boys played. We mostly played with home-made dolls or with a skipping rope or played hop-scotch, mostly with female cousins. If a young male cousin joined us, he would be ridiculed and discouraged from doing so. Such gender distinctions would annoy me a great deal; I often wanted to join my male cousins in playing ball or in flying kites. Commercial toys were not as common as they are nowadays.

We girls were instructed to be more respectful toward elders, cover our heads in the presence of the older men of the family, which was considered as a sign of respect. We were also instructed to cover our bosoms properly when we started developing physically. The dupatta became mandatory and had to be worn in a crisscrossed manner to cover the bosoms. Unmarried girls were discouraged from wearing brassieres; it was considered shameful for a girl to buy a brassiere and tell the usually male shopkeeper her size. Some of us learnt to stitch brassieres at home and had to wash and dry them away from everyone's gaze. Different standards of modesty were applied to unmarried and married women—married women had more liberties and the dictates of modesty were less for them. Women acquired full, social status only after being married and then enjoyed a certain amount of societal indulgence. For example, married women wore *chikan*³ kurtas, long shirts made of muslin, which is a see-through material with only a brassiere underneath and covered themselves with large dupattas. They wore *ghararas*.⁴ The waist of the *gharara* was embroidered with colorful threads or *zari*.⁵ This obviously must have been done to draw attention to a woman's waist. I suppose the idea was

³ A form of delicate hand embroidery.

⁴ wide-legged skirt-like pants covering the legs.

⁵ Type of gold thread used for embroidery.

to make married women sexually attractive to their husbands, but unmarried women's sexuality was suppressed as their virginity, their most "precious asset," was to be protected.

Unmarried girls were discouraged from decking themselves with very bright clothes and heavy jewelry and wearing make-up or flowers was also disapproved. Dressing up or conducting oneself in a manner that attracted male attention was highly disapproved. Girls were not given any knowledge of the facts of life; on the contrary, every effort was made to keep them ignorant about anything related to sex, while married women were allowed to indulge in sexual conversations. In our region, it was a custom that on the morning after the nuptial night (Muslim marriages are supposed to be consummated on the very first night, as the marriage is not legally valid until it is consummated) the newly sexually initiated bride would be made to sit in a gathering of married women and professional singers would sing lurid songs to the enjoyment of the audience. Unmarried girls were not allowed to join this *mehfil*.⁶

Izzat

The concepts of izzat (honor) and shame also played an important role in socially conditioning girls. These were drilled into me during my growing-up years. These concepts were closely associated with a woman's sexuality. A woman was central to the concept of izzat, as she could bring down or enhance her family's izzat through her behavior; in particular, through her sexual conduct. For this reason, she was guarded and her sexuality controlled. An unmarried girl was also taught to suppress her sexuality. Nothing could sully a family's izzat as much as the loss of a daughter's virginity before marriage.

I was not allowed to go out or visit my friends. My socializing was confined to visits to relatives, accompanied by parents. Whenever we went out, we would be seated in a covered tonga,⁷ wear burkas and be accompanied by a male escort, usually our father's peon, if our father himself was not accompanying us. The peon would sit in the front seat of the tonga and we would be seated in the back seat, segregated by a curtain. A similar arrangement was made if I was occasionally allowed to visit a school friend.

⁶ Gathering.

⁷ A horse-driven carriage.

A girl was expected to sacrifice her talents on the altar of family izzat. Activities that led to public exposure were denied to girls; any artistic talent, such as drawing, painting or music was discouraged.

Women did find some outlet for their artistic potential by dying dupattas in imaginative patterns and color combinations and by embroidering articles of daily use. Unfortunately, I was fond of music and drama. We lived not far from a famous music college in Lucknow and I expressed my desire to join that college to learn Indian classical music. But my family immediately disagreed. How could a girl from a “respectable” family even think of learning music? Only women from the professional singers’ castes or prostitutes sang in public. Younger women and girls did sing folk songs at family functions as amateur singers, but learning music and singing in public was strongly disapproved of.

I was also fond of acting and would participate in school plays with certain riders from our parents. Once, in a school play, I was to play the role of a newlywed bride, which meant that I had to be dressed as a bride. My parents initially did not allow me to do so while still unmarried, but after a great deal of apprehension, they gave the permission. On another occasion, soon after Partition, a play *Dhani Bankein* (green bangles) written by a well-known Urdu writer, Ismat Chughtai, was presented in the Zenana Park (Ladies’ Park) in Lucknow. I had the main role in the play, for which I was given the permission only after some discussion in the family and that too because it was to be staged in an exclusive women’s park where the audience was going to be only women. The play was based on post-independence communal riots and depicted the plight of a young woman who had lost her husband in those riots. While lamenting over her misfortune, she was supposed to say that she was also pregnant and that made her sorrow even greater. How could an unmarried girl say that she was pregnant, even in a play? The director was advised to delete that sentence from my dialogues.

The play was highly appreciated. It was later decided that it would be presented in the bigger common open park. But my parents did not allow me to act in front of men. I was very frustrated and angry, which was partly compensated by the fact that Ansar Chacha—my uncle who was a journalist—published a review of the play in the local newspaper and praised my performance. I was thrilled to see my name in a newspaper, but my *abbujaan*⁸ was not happy that my name

⁸ Father.