

Revisiting a Fractured Legacy: Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Muslim Women Education.

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Abstract

Indian Muslims during second half of nineteenth century witnessed significant changes in their socio-political and economic conditions. The men of intellect among the community sought the redressal of the despondency within Muslims through varied approaches of reformation. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was prominent among these reformers who advocated the necessity of western-modern education as a panacea for the deprived conditions of Muslims. Although not being antagonistic towards the education in principle but he disapproved the modern education for women and limited his mission of education only to men. He upheld the traditional model of education suitable for women and thus drew criticism from academic circle. In this paper an attempt is made to revisit the already existing debate regarding Sir Syed's stance on education of women. An attempt to provide the plausible reasons which might have influenced Sir Syed's opinion would be accounted. In the light of primary sources how his personal life, social standing and prevailing circumstances molded his opinion would be highlighted which would help in situating the reformer in a balanced perspective.

Keywords: *Purdah, Burqa, Nafs, Aql, Ashraf, Niswan, Home/world Dichotomy, Fitna.*

The complete loss of Muslim political power in the wake of mutiny of 1857 and in turn the socio-economic changes which emerged in its wake had significant implications for the position of Indian Muslim women. Their roles as transmitters of culture as well as household managers became increasingly significant during this period as Muslims had to maintain their socio-economic

standards with the limited resources at their disposal. And because of these economic changes, the educational opportunities were becoming increasingly limited in the late nineteenth century. As the societal changes were expected to meet with considerable resistance in India where even today functional literacy is poor except for some advanced education among substantial proportions of populations.¹ So whatever reforms, especially regarding the upliftment of women emerged during nineteenth century are concerned were limited. The attempts towards the reformation were carried without jeopardizing the existing social structures in which the defined occupational roles for women were absent. Muslim conservatism was also equally responsible for the deprived status of Muslim women as a considerable segment of leadership among Indian Muslims during the second half of the nineteenth century perceived every organized effort to enable women to read or write unfavorable.²

After the encounter of India with colonialism and in the wake of mutiny of 1857, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, was the most prominent reformer who strived for a compromise between tradition and modernity. He aimed at the regeneration of Muslims by convincing them to adopt western scientific education. For this he tried to debunk the myth that Islam goes in contradiction with science and reason and argued that scientific study would further strengthen the faith of Muslims. This movement which he launched for the harmonization of western thought and Islam to make way for the progress of Muslims came to be known as Aligarh Movement. The post mutiny era has been viewed as a period of decay and decadence in terms of socio-political and economic life of Muslims. Muslims were held responsible for the mutiny which paved the way for strained relations between British and Muslim. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan tried to change the image of Muslims in the eyes of the colonial government. He sensitized them about the importance of western education and tried to persuade them to change their lazy habits.³ He worked for the rapprochement between Muslim's and British so that Muslim could adapt to the prevailing circumstances. But it is quite astonishing to believe that such a visionary person did not accord much relevance to women education and focused his energies on male education. His personality conditioned by his social standing, culture, and social compulsions is believed to made him limit his agenda to masculinity, thereby deriving criticism from

few quarters and apologies from some. Sir Syed attitude towards women education, which indeed was an attitude of Aligarh as he was the sole representative of the Aligarh movement and remained unshaded by any personality till his death, was one among the complex facets of his personality.

One of the associates of Sir Syed, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, alias Papa Mian, who initiated the Muslim Female Education, was the first to accuse Sir Syed. He argued that Sir Syed hindered the attempts to impart modern education to girls at Aligarh. In his autobiography, *Mushahidat Aur Tassawurat (Observations and Impressions, 1969)*, he mentions that the concept of modern education for female was not existent during late half of 19th century and even the prominent leader of Muslim community Sir Syed opposed it, and his determined discontent remained unchanged till his death. On the one hand, Sir Syed made concrete efforts towards the spread of English education among boys. However, he disapproved imparting modern education to girls and was always dismissive about the English education for girls. His stance was similar to that of the maulvi's who described English education as an act of infidelity. He also considered English education detrimental to the moral standards of the girls.⁴

Gail Minault and David Lelyveld also are critical about Sir Syed's objectionable views on female education. Gail Minault produced a piece of evidence and argued that Sir Syed did not even wish to discuss the rights of women granted by Islam. She alleged him of tearing a manuscript on women's right in Islam written by one of his associates, Syed Mumtaz Ali. Minault also mentions a piece of verbal evidence said to be disclosed by Mumtaz Ali to Hafeez Jallandhari. In her article 'Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and Huquq Niswan: An Advocate of Women's Rights in Islam in the late Nineteenth Century' she used it as indisputable evidence to prove that Sir Syed's disapproved female education.⁵ It appeared to her that Sir Syed opposed the very idea of making Muslim women aware of their rights granted by Islam. She narrated the incident in her book too and argued that in the late 1890s, Syed Mumtaz Ali visited Aligarh and presented a manuscript of his treatise which espoused the women's rights in Islam *Huquq-un-Niswan* before Sir Syed. But Sir Syed tore the manuscript and left the place in agnush. Mumtaz Ali waited until Sir Syed's death in 1898, to publish *Huquq-un-Niswan*.

David Lelyveld endorsed Gail Minault's argument while delivering a lecture on 'Sir Syed and Women's Education', organized by the Centre of Advanced Studies in Medieval History, AMU, in 2015. He points out that manuscript prepared by Mumtaz Ali left Sir Syed so perturbed that he decided not to let it be published. According to him, Sir Syed did not want women to go further than their existing defined role of transmitter of culture and maintaining household affairs. Lelyveld accused Sir Syed that he hardly stood for the political, social, and religious emancipation of women. He held that the enthusiasm of Mumtaz Ali regarding women's rights infuriated Sir Syed. He further argued that Sir Syed while addressing several issues in his life shifted his ideas and goals. The change in his ideas speaks to the changing world he lived in and the balancing of competing goals. As a staunch defender of purdah and opponent of women's education, Sir Syed was hardly the man of modern ideas that we usually believe.⁶

This whole accusation of Sir Syed being patriarchal which was developed around an article published by Hafeez Jalandhari has been refuted by Shafey Kidwai in his recent work.⁷ Hafeez Jalandhari was closely associated with Maulvi Syed Mumtaz Ali (1860–1935), who had spent considerable time with Sir Syed at Aligarh, before settling down in Lahore where he established a publishing house. Maulvi Mumtaz died on 8 June 1935, and his journal, *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan*, published an issue on him. Hafeez Jalandhari gives graphic details on how Sir Syed ripped up Mumtaz Ali's manuscript. His article, based on memory of his meeting with Maulvi Mumtaz Ali, was first published in a literary journal *Makhzan* (Lahore), in 1927, and its revised and updated version appeared in the special issue of *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan*.⁸

Shafey argues that, Sheikh Abdullah also talks about the same incident and his testimony also appeared in the same issue of *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan* but, surprisingly, it escapes the attention of Minault, and other scholars who take Hafeez Jalandhari's version as the irrefutable truth. Shafey argues that Sheikh Abdullah's narration can be considered more authentic as he was a close associate of both Sir Syed and Syed Mumtaz Ali. And Sheikh Abdullah while referring to the incident said that the manuscript in question was not the complete manuscript of *Huqooq-e-Niswan*, which ran to more than 200 pages. Instead, it

was an article or an outline of a proposal intended to guide the program for the spread of women's education that Mumtaz Ali presented before Sir Syed.

It is also noteworthy that Syed Mumtaz Ali always looked up to Sir Syed for guidance. The collection of Sir Syed's letters, carries six letters addressed to Mumtaz Ali, and there is not a single reference regarding this incident. Moreover, Syed Mumtaz Ali's book *Huqooq-e-Niswan*, said to be torn apart by Sir Syed, makes absolutely no mention of it. The manuscript is said to have been completed in 1895, and Syed Mumtaz Ali requested Sir Syed to write an introduction. The book appeared in 1898 after the death of Sir Syed, and it also carried a letter of Sir Syed's in which he propounded his reluctance towards women's education. Sir Syed's unfavorable remarks are the part of the preface, yet the author does not mention the shredding of the manuscript, not even in an implicit manner. The author does not mention the incident; it is puzzling to note why a secondary narration of the event is being used to malign the image of Sir Syed.⁹ Syed Mumtaz Ali, projected as the most influential proponent of women's education by Gail Minault and other scholars, wasn't critical towards Sir Syed's approach towards women education. On the contrary, he highlighted the reasons why Sir Syed neglected the cause of emancipation of women. He asserts that at that time modern education was not prevalent within a considerable number of Muslim boys. Sir Syed was therefore right in pointing out in his letter that it was uncertain whether every educated girl would get a husband who admired higher education. If her husband disliked education, then her whole life would be marked by misery and hardship.¹⁰ Moreover, after Mumtaz Ali wrote his treatise, he planned to start a newspaper for the advocacy of female education and he approached Sir Syed to find an appropriate name for his weekly. Sir Syed reacted unfavorably towards Mumtaz Ali's intent on making the newspaper exclusive for women in terms of editors and contributors. He wrote, "If you want to carry forward your idea despite having been made aware of inherent contradictions of the proposal, the proposed names of the weekly did not impress me. If you still want to start a newspaper for women, then name it *Tahzeeb-e-Niswan*."¹¹ Furthermore, the son of Mumtaz Ali, Imtiaz Ali Taj while narrating several incidents involving Sir Syed had only praise for him. Mumtaz Ali did not mention anything about the tearing of script. Moreover,

it also seems highly dubious as Sir Syed always criticized the practice of burning and banning of books, no matter how offensive the material might be.¹² Besides Sir Syed also did not hold any grudges with proponents of women education. The appointment of Karamat Hussain as the first law professor of Aligarh in 1891 is a testimony to that. Even Karamat Hussain was very pessimistic about his nomination because of being a strong advocate of women education.¹³

Other evidence suggests that Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, during the early years of his career in late 1860's and 1870's was favorable towards women education and depicted poverty as the leading cause for the decline of female education among them.¹⁴ During the decade of 1860-1870, the Aligarh Institute Gazette evidently influenced by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, published articles on the government's initiatives encouraging female education. In 1867, the establishment of a school for Muslim girl's school in Bangalore solely through indigenous efforts was highly appreciated. Female education was believed to be essential for the social, moral and intellectual advancement of a nation. It was stressed that a nation could not rise to true greatness so long as its women continue to remain in intellectual darkness.¹⁵ During 1869 and in the subsequent years, several articles in the Aligarh Institute Gazette related to the importance of female education and its spread as the chief means for the general spread of education were published. These articles appearing in the A.I.G indicates that in the 1860's, Syed Ahmad Khan was not unconcerned towards Muslim female education. A letter which he wrote from London to the Secretary, Scientific Society, Aligarh in 1869, gave the same impression. He writes that:

He was highly impressed by his landlady's daughter, who when fell ill, took to reading religious books which Sir Syed thought that she would find too obscure and irrational because of their controversial nature. He further commented, "From these remarks, you will see how well-bred and intelligent are the women here even of the middle classes. Is it unworthy of admiration that a woman on her sickbed would try to amuse herself and pass her time by such a cheerful occupation as that? Have you ever heard or seen any raja or chief, notable or gentleman in India not to speak of women resorting to such judicious and astonishing means of amusement in their sickness? Do the Indians possess such literary taste and love for knowledge.¹⁶ Moreover, he was also found

appreciative of the progress of Muslim women training, which he had observed when he passed through Turkey and Egypt.¹⁷

However, there are references suggesting a change in his thinking from 1880 onwards as he started opposing every step taken by the government for the education of Muslim women.¹⁸ It seems evident from his answers to the questions put to him by the Education commission of 1882, where he stressed the futility of every effort on the part of the government towards women education as earlier endeavors had borne nothing fruitful. He thought that because government policies towards women education had not gained any response from respectable families, neither the lower class has derived any benefits, so such attempts on the part of government must be brought to a halt. He was not only indifferent or lacked enthusiasm but condemned such endeavors in strong terms. And he warned the government that under such circumstances introducing female education among Muslim would produce mischievous results.¹⁹ Even he went on citing the government's intention to force girls to attend schools and give up purdah as one of the causes of the revolt of 1857.²⁰ He upheld the conservative ideas regarding women education, and his reform movement was confined only to male circles. While the reformer of revivalist thought like Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi believed that women are potentially equal to their men in their capacity for understanding, and hence their reform and management is central to the religious change of all Muslims.²¹ Sir Syed Ahmed Khan is believed to propose the sort of down filtration theory stating the once a large number of Muslim men get educated; they will carry the process to the ranks of women.²² His thought on the basis of his writing is argued to be similar to the most of the men of his time, that women were inherently inferior to men physically and intellectually.²³ In fact he labelled women as emotional being and accused them of being stacked stubbornly to outdated customs.²⁴ He was also critical of a similar curriculum in modern schools for both men and women, which, according to him, must be different.²⁵

Thus, Sir Syed, in his opposition, towards modern female education developed two primary arguments. First, he believed that education should come to Muslim men who in turn would filter it to women in their household as to him educating women before men would jeopardize gender relationship and fracture the life

within the house.²⁶ It has been argued that this was believed as the outcome of psychological barrier as not all Muslim male was educated therefore the marriage of an educated young woman with an illiterate or with a less educated man could have disturbed emotional equanimity of the both.²⁷ But this seems nothing more than the apology because this psychological paradigm could be well related in the case of an educated man marrying uneducated women. And gradually, it proved to be relevant, and it was indeed the need of educated wives felt by knowledgeable men which probably became one of the motivating factors for the galaxy of Aligarh luminaries to endeavor for the unfulfilled aspect of the Aligarh movement: “Women Education.”

His second argument is mainly built against the usefulness of the government system of education for girls categorically. According to him the content of education and the curriculum introduced by the government was devised primarily for boys which was unsuitable to meet the need of Indian girls and women.²⁸ And it was also ignoring the religious education became the reason for Muslim reluctance to a government school. One may argue that the economic compulsions had made him more committed to his stance of opposition. But the western part of Uttar Pradesh had a low literacy level among Muslim women as compared to the eastern part despite being economically sound. Indeed, poor economic conditions of Muslim in the central and eastern region of the province motivated them for acquiring modern education to elevate their status, and missionary schools had more appeal for them.²⁹

After the critical assessment of Sir Syed's thought and prevailing circumstances, one can argue that his remedy to the challenges was conditioned by his education, his social standing, and cultural influences and most important the socio-political circumstances. The reluctance of the pioneer of modern education among Muslims towards the cause of female education needs to be assessed with precautions.

The very first argument which one can propound to justify his reluctance towards female education is perhaps because of the influences of his mother on his life. Sir Syed saw no need for women education other than traditional home-based learning. Her mother Aziz-un-Nisa Begum was his first teacher, which is

acknowledged time and again by him in his book *Seerat-e-Faridiya*.³⁰ Sir Syed pointed out that he would repeat Persian lessons before her, and home education helped him to understand the lesson quickly. Hali mentioned that her reading was restricted to the *Holy Quran* and a few elementary books, but she had the most exceptional gift for educating her children.³¹ As a direct inheritor of this system of education, prevalent among the nobles, irrespective of religion, Sir Syed probably might have wished to continue women education on this model. This might be one of the primary reasons molding Sir Syed's opinion regarding women education. The personality of (Aziz-un-Nisa Begum), his mother, had a far-reaching impact on him to whom he pays tribute by a famous Victorian maxim "a good mother is better than a thousand teacher." Perhaps it is evident from the sources that she acted as a teacher to her son and gave him instruction in Persian classic, and what has been more significant is the fact that she imbibes him with the values of the spirit of public service.³² Such a profound supervised upbringing may have had convinced him towards the pointlessness of school education as a home learned women in traditional knowledge had made enormous and valuable contributions in featuring his personality.

Second important consideration while attempting to explain his reluctance towards women education is the nature of reform movements during 19th century. Reform movements in the nineteenth century among the Muslims or Hindus had a certain peculiarity with them. They were carried within the hitherto established notions of society or without jeopardizing the existing frameworks. The improvement in the position of women constituted an essential element of reforms, but changes and modifications were sought to be achieved within the prevalent societal frameworks. Even the methods adopted by the women reformers like Sultan Jahan Begum of Bhopal while justifying female education and establishing girls school provides a clear indication of how she sought to bring incremental change by working within customary norms.³³ The Quran and episodes from the Islamic history were quoted frequently in writing and speeches, purdah was strictly followed and the curriculum emphasized moral as well as religious teachings as well as domestic roles for women.³⁴ There was a fear of both proselytization and exposure of women to harmful influences, which indeed proved a real hindrance in the way of women education.³⁵ The opposition

towards the reformation was backed by an appeal to tradition, which gained the support among masses speedily. In fact, the women who tried to imitate the western ways were ridiculed and became the laughing stock in both male and female audience.³⁶ These changes also need to be understood through broader emphasis within the Islamic tradition regarding women and their place in society. It has been argued that this emphasis developed most strongly as Islam came into contact with societies in the medieval Middle East, which had a considerably more negative view of women.³⁷ In these societies, women did not have a role in the public sphere or in upholding Islam but were part of a domestic realm composed of women, slaves, and youths, who were all considered weak, pagan, and potentially dangerous.³⁸ All three were considered as sources of *fitna* (social chaos) and, women were portrayed as being distinct sexualized beings that could disrupt the ordered world of men. It was also believed that women's physiology, their sexual and reproductive nature made them particularly vulnerable to *nafs* (inner-self).³⁹ Moreover, they were considered less endowed with the qualities of *aql* (intellectual and reasoning power) which was seen as being much better developed in men.⁴⁰ And women's powerful and unconstrained sexuality was seen as a need to be controlled which paved the way for the institution of seclusion, in which women's contact with unrelated men was regulated.

For Sir Syed, the existing education for Muslim women was sufficient to perform his domestic roles. Therefore, he also aspired for the reforms within traditional frameworks, which is evident even from his position on purdah also. Although he felt that the custom of purdah as practiced in India had been carried to the extreme. Such isolation, he argued, was a cause of women's ignorance, but he did not conceive veiling as a hindrance to the progress of women. By purdah, he meant seclusion, not to be confused with veil. This contradiction in his views may have been a calculated argument for striving for a change keeping in consonance with the existing traditional notions. Moreover, he did not oppose purdah completely since it had religious sanction and was not a prerequisite of only Muslim women, but it was symbolic to upper-class women irrespective of religion. Besides significant changes were also taking place in *Purdah* practice,

as the women's traditional seclusion within the home gave way to considerable freedom of movement outside the home. It was mainly due to the increasing popularity of the *burqa*, which allowed them to retain standards of respectability while becoming somewhat more independent.

The statistics from Punjab revealed significantly that the Muslim girls were at par with other women in a matter of education not only in schools meant for them exclusively but also attended municipal schools as well as schools run by *Shiksha Sabha*.⁴¹ But these schools derive girl's students from the lower class, and the reason for the reluctance of the *Ashraf* class to send their daughters was disapproving the mixing of their girls with lower class and absence of imparting religious education. This, the *Ashraf* class reluctance and their eagerness for religious education in schools while maintaining the caste structure made the endeavors more difficult which probably have convinced him towards the futility of women education in English schools. However, it is important to mention that he was not opposed to female education in principle but only to their knowledge in modern schools, and this was a common and prevalent opinion among the *Ashraf's* in 1880. These *Ashraf* Muslim service classes had evolved a distinct lifestyle which was based on their past position under the Mughal rule as well as constraints of the later nineteenth century. And the socio-economic changes which had emerged had significant implications for women's multiple roles within the family. Their roles as transmitters of culture as well as household managers became increasingly significant during this period as *Ashraf* Muslims probably had to maintain their socio-economic standards with the limited resources.

One can also situate Syed Ahmed Khan's stance towards women education within the Partha Chatterjee's framework of material/spiritual dichotomy or home/world dichotomy. Partha argued that Indians asserted that although European power has succeeded in colonizing the nation by its superior material culture but they have failed to colonize the identity of the east, which lies in its distinctive and ethical culture. To this domain of culture the guidance and intervention of the British were unaccepted and it finally led to the crystallization

of the social role of gender in terms of the home/world dichotomy.⁴² Sir Syed is also found to argue similarly that we wish our women to be educated, but if education means letting them loose to mix with anyone and their deterioration of morals and loss of honor and invasion of our homes, we prefer our reputation to the education.⁴³ And in terms of Muslims precisely quite as much as the *sharia*, the purdah also symbolized the Indian Muslims identity and integrity of the community as a whole.⁴⁴ He upholds that identity and, in fact, condemned the opposition of the purdah system and mocked the menfolk to first get at par with the British then, you must speak regarding women empowerment which some believed had been affected because of purdah.⁴⁵

Moreover, the position of women was quite akin among different communities in the nineteenth century but varied within the class, caste, and region. Whatever reforms were carried out in respect of women education was limited and without jeopardizing the existing notions of society. Sir Syed too followed the tune and his personal experience, some timely contradiction and compulsion too had a share in his position. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan focused his all energies on male education and disapproved the women education not in principle but only in modern schools and found the existing education system of women education relevant and a compromise with the maintenance of social equilibrium. The defining role of women in society has always been depressed by social factors in large. He might have been convinced that any endeavor towards women education, likewise, politics is premature. But an apology that strives to project Sir Syed's reluctance only to the social factors would be insufficient. Sir Syed, in the absence of a socially defined occupational role for women in the Muslim community, probably also have adhered to the home/world dichotomy. And he too was the product of that very time and had powerful patriarchal people surrounding him. Moreover, the Aligarh movement started in the pursuance of bringing tradition and modernity at compromise was not welcomed from the various sections. And the kind of opposition which Sir Syed faced while advocating modern education for men may have convinced him that this new endeavor would relegate him to back foot. Because the women in the nineteenth century were beginning to be located in the spiritual domain of culture, which was considered to be undominated and encroachment in that domain was

believed to be unacceptable. And more important, the resources at his disposal which were too meagre could also add to the justification for his reluctance towards women education. Nonetheless he was never against the education in principle but believed that modern education for women at that juncture of time was unaffordable and counted on the efficiency of traditional education for women. Sir Syed was a man who shifted his ideas and goals according to the prevailing circumstances. Had he lived enough he probably would have been the leading figure in the cause of women education. And indeed his thought proved relevant as the need of the educated wives was one of other reason which paved the way for the cause of women education at Aligarh at the behest of its luminaries.

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