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An Invitation into the *Mehfil*: Muslim Women's Interregional Intellectual Networks

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Abstract

Scholarship on prominent women's organizations of the early twentieth century highlights how American and European suffragists participated in and published reports about one another's activities. Less well-known are the exciting circuits of exchange that took place between women in Asia and Africa in spaces emerging out of colonial modernity. In this article, I explore how such circuits evoke cultural institutions embedded within shared histories of courtly patronage of the performing arts and rhetoric. To this end, I posit the *mehfil* as an alternative paradigm to capture how women's ideational networks operated within the Perso-Arabic sphere in the first half of the twentieth century. The *mehfil*, in addition to delineating neglected circuits of women's intellectual exchanges, also demonstrates how such exchanges, if attended to, pose certain tensions with known feminist histories. By broadening the definition of who we think of as early women activists or as pioneers of women's intellectual networks, it interrogates and intervenes within our understanding of first-wave feminisms. By foregrounding the interaction of claims for gender justice with anti-imperialist discourse, the *mehfil* provides an early model of women's collectivity that hinges not on demands for suffrage or other legislative reform, but on critique of colonial patriarchy.

Women's organizations, such as the International Council of Women (founded in 1888), the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (founded in 1904 and originally named the International Woman Suffrage Alliance), or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (founded in 1915), and their transnational presence in the early twentieth century are often viewed primarily through the lens of suffrage, and consequently, of first-wave feminism. Scholarship on these organizations highlights how American and European suffragists participated in one another's events and published reports about one another's activities (Rupp 1997; DuBois 1998; Sandell 2015). Less well-known are the intellectual and interlocutory networks of circulation and exchange that existed between women in Asia and Africa. In this article, I explore how such networks both constitute and critique colonial

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modernity, while simultaneously evoking cultural institutions embedded within genealogies of women's own traditions of cultural, philosophical, and religious thought. To this end, I posit the *mehfil* as an alternative paradigm to capture how women's ideological networks operated within what I call the Perso-Arabic sphere in the first half of the twentieth century.

The *mehfil* is an interpretive lens that focuses on women's collectivity in an interregional and multilingual framework. Through such a framework, it reads the lives and work of women who, by virtue of a perpetually gendered pattern of uptake within hegemonic, male-dominated canons and their institutionalization in archives, textbooks, and scholarship, are considered marginal players in their own regional or vernacular contexts. In the *mehfil*, however, the same women emerge as initiators and catalysts of lateral intellectual networks that, I argue, have the potential to afford them renewed visibility and relevance within women's studies scholarship in the twenty-first century. In addition to delineating neglected circuits of women's intellectual exchanges, the *mehfil* also demonstrates how such exchanges, if attended to, pose certain tensions with known feminist histories. This may explain why participants in the *mehfil* have not attracted sustained scholarly attention within feminist recuperative scholarship, except in the past four decades (Gopal 1994, 287). In light of the *mehfil*'s relative exclusion from Western feminist contexts, it is important to examine how it foregrounds concerns emerging outside of those contexts. In contrast to the underlying imperialist attitudes adopted and propagated by prominent Anglo-American women's organizations of the early twentieth century, the *mehfil* underscores the intersection of women's rights discourse with a variety of anti-imperialist stances. By broadening the definition of who we think of as early women activists or pioneers of women's intellectual networks, the *mehfil* interrogates and intervenes within our understanding of first-wave feminisms as characterized exclusively by demands for legislative reform and demonstrates how other issues, such as those stemming from reformist agendas, were majorly constitutive of women's movements of the time.

The *mehfil* to which I issue my readers an invitation is located in the Perso-Arabic sphere: a linguistic and geographical category encompassing parts of West, Central, and South Asia, and North Africa, where the influence of Islam is predominant in structuring cultural and creative contexts. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this sphere came into relief through colonial modernity and the attendant proliferation in technologies of communication, including but not limited to print. Imperial networks, in fact, became the bases upon which Islamicate "traces" (Lawrence n.d., para. 19) were grafted to open up new avenues and modalities of being and interfacing with other peoples and places. Such networks also facilitated greater interaction among Muslim women in geographically distant but culturally similar milieux and became the space for interpersonal and empathetic dialogue among these women on the basis of a common set of experiences and concerns. Such shared concerns emerged out of the momentous changes taking place when new and strict patriarchal injunctions developed in response to colonial occupation in these regions, and when reformist agendas recast women in the interstices of the public and the private, the singular and the plural. While grappling with the demands of Islamic reform and modernity placed upon them, Muslim women writers all over the Perso-Arabic sphere developed a shared vocabulary through which to voice their critiques of the patriarchal and imperialist societies they inhabited.

Mehfil is the Arabic/Urdu word for literary gathering, and represented a remarkable site of the exchange of ideas and literary compositions in the courts of medieval Arabia and Persia, and the Mughal empire.¹ At such courtly *mehfils*, poets and musicians came

together to explore social and metaphysical questions in rhyme and song, receive the patronage of monarchs and other aristocratic personages, and attract the notice and tutelage of senior artists to keep alive the shared inheritances of specialist schools known as *gharanas*. In their sociocultural history as performance spaces, *mehfils* came to acquire a relatively democratic dimension as they traveled from *durbars* (courts) to *kothas* (quarters of courtesans). Despite such transformation, *mehfils* remained intimate and exclusive gatherings where novices and initiates came not just to demonstrate their talents, but also to learn from *ustads* (highly skilled practitioners of the arts). In this article, I argue that the public and seemingly masculine space of the *mehfil* had the potential to enter more intimate and feminine spaces of Muslim modernity in European colonies and protectorates in the early twentieth century. The *mehfil* is, for me, an illuminative prism that enables the discovery of wider interconnected spaces in Asia and Africa, where Muslim women writers inherited and perpetuated Islamicate imaginaries, storytelling traditions, and textual genres.

My entry point into this *mehfil* is through pre-Partition, undivided Bengal. Bengal was ruled by subsequent dynasties of central Asian *sultans* and Mughal *subahdars* (provincial rulers) between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. Such rulers left an indelible mark on styles of architecture,² dialects,³ and patterns of script⁴ in the region. After the nineteenth century, despite British attempts to root out the impact of Islam on mainstream Bengali culture through divisive linguistic, educational, and institutional policies, a sizeable Muslim populace continued to patronize and include Islamicate vocabulary and themes in their literature and performing arts. Such a populace was, however, beginning to be eclipsed by a Hindu Brahminical elite, extensively theorized as the *bhadralok* (Broomfield 1968; Chatterji 1994; Sartori 2008). One of the issues that animated this manufactured divide was that of English education, deployed not only to create opposition between Muslims and Hindus competing for employment in the civil services, but also to voice the “woman question” (Sangari and Vaid 1990; Sarkar 2001).

I began mapping the conjectural space of the *mehfil* by examining print materials in the imaginative repertoire of Bengal’s Muslim women writers, especially Bengali periodicals published in the first half of the twentieth century, which they read, edited, and wrote for. Such periodicals emerged as what Ronit Ricci calls “citation-sites” (Ricci 2012, 332). Ricci’s concept of citation is rather flexible and inclusive; she includes within it practices of reading, writing, translation, and transmission ranging “from direct quotation to more general and less precise forms of adopting and adapting prior sources” (332). I found that citation of these kinds, represented by articles in colonial-era women’s periodicals, gave rise to a community of creators and consumers among Muslim women in Bengal who discussed and deliberated on the contents and concerns of such articles. Foremost among such periodicals was *Saogat* (Gift), published monthly between 1918 and 1947, and edited by Mohammad Nasiruddin. Two sections in every issue of *Saogat* particularly attracted my attention: “Muslim Jahan” (The Muslim World) and “Zenana Mehfil”⁵ (Soirée in the Inner Rooms) (Dutta Gupta 2009, 340). The former focused on photographic coverage of various regions where Islam exerted a significant cultural influence, and the latter focused on news of women’s progress from all over the world. These two sections often spoke to each other, as when *Saogat*, especially its women’s issues, published articles about Muslim women working to ensure women’s access to institutionalized education, or Muslim women’s participation in nationalist movements.

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley provides examples of such eminent Muslim women from different parts of the world, who were all engaged with reformist efforts in one way or

another. She mentions Kartini of Indonesia, Sadiqa Daulatabadi of Iran, Halide Edib of Turkey, and Huda Shaarawi of Egypt (Lambert-Hurley 1998, 265). Among these women, Edib and Shaarawi featured prominently in the periodicals that are the primary materials of this article. As I was getting excited by numerous instances of interregional connections, and being introduced to new names and figures through close reading of periodicals such as *Saogat*, finding primary materials that attested to such connections proved to be more daunting than I had anticipated. I explored catalogues in libraries of present-day Dhaka and Kolkata to find thirteen Muslim women writers from colonial Bengal whose works had survived in the archives. Surveying the periodicals that these writers engaged with, I became acquainted with the names and work of some of the women writers and activists from the larger Perso-Arabic sphere listed above. I observed that periodicals of this kind featured exciting accounts of such illustrious women's achievements in literature, other arts, and political activism. These accounts, in turn, penetrated and shaped the aspirational narratives and polemical writing of Muslim women in early twentieth-century Bengal.

The voices that stood out as the most acerbic, and the most astute, belonged to educators, founders of nationalist organizations for women, and participants in the arena of print cultures through editorship and other creative profiles. In Bengal, the most prominent among such voices belonged to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), known for establishing the first school aimed at Muslim girls in Calcutta, the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, and for starting the Bengal chapter of the *Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam* (All-India Muslim Ladies' Association). Sakhawat Hossain's legacy has since been institutionalized to a significant extent in India and Bangladesh. The School of Women's Studies at New Delhi's prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University has named its annual lecture after her. Her death anniversary, December 9, is celebrated as Rokeya Day in Bangladesh. Her utopian novella in English, *Sultana's Dream*, has inspired Brooklyn-based artist Chitra Ganesh to create a piece exhibited at the Dhaka Art Summit in February 2020, which depicts a world where men stay indoors, while women create new and powerful ways of being by harnessing the power of the sun (Banks 2020, para.16). Sofia Khatun (dates unknown) is not nearly as well-known, even among scholars of early Muslim women's writing in Bengal. My knowledge of her corpus of twenty-five or so Bengali essays published in just three years of active writing between 1922 and 1925 and focused on a variety of topics, ranging from women's position in ancient Egypt and contemporary Turkey to motherhood and child-rearing in a colonized society, comes from the chance discovery of an edited volume. This volume, which I had never heard of before, was given to me by Dr. Miratun Nahar, writer and social commentator based in Kolkata (earlier known as Calcutta), from her personal collection, in the spring of 2017 when I was visiting the archives in search of the primary materials for this article.

Within the larger Perso-Arabic sphere, a comparable set of women writers, editors, and social activists came into the public eye in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Aisha Ismat al-Taimuriya (1840–1902) was the inheritor of a tradition of women's poetry-writing in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Daughter of a Circassian concubine and a Turkish aristocrat and government official, Al-Taimuriya first received a Quranic education in the arts of rhetoric and composition, and later took it upon herself to adopt as teachers two women famed for their skill in verse-composition: Fatima al-Azhariya and Sitita al-Tablawiya. Perhaps the most prominent Egyptian woman of the time was Huda Shaarawi (1879–1947), founder and president of the Egyptian Feminist Union (1923–47), president of the Arab Feminist Union

(1945–47), and vice-president of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (1935). The most enduring image of Shaarawi today is of her standing on a Cairo railway platform and throwing off her veil in full view of the crowd, after returning from the first meeting of the International Alliance of Women, held in Rome in 1923. To commemorate this historic moment, the cover of *L'Égyptienne* (The Egyptian Woman), the French women's periodical established by Shaarawi in 1925, featured a woman removing her veil. Less well-known, but an equally prolific participant in the women's print sphere of twentieth-century Egypt, was Malak Hifni Nasif (1886–1918), commonly identified by her pseudonym, Bahithat al-Badiya. Al-Badiya often delivered lectures at the offices of the liberal newspaper, *Al-Jarida* (The Daily Paper), and the Egyptian University, for the benefit of its first generation of women students. A number of her most widely attended lectures were published under the title *Al-Nisaiyat* (Feminist Pieces) in 1910.

In Lebanon, a woman writer who became the center of a major controversy in the late 1920s and went on to determine the course of all future women's movements in the country, was Nazira Zain-al-Din (sometimes spelled Zeineddine) (1908–76). Author of the lengthy Arabic treatise whose title had been translated as *Unveiling and Veiling: Lectures and Views on the Liberation of Women and Social Renewal in the Arab World* (1928), Zain-al-Din is remembered today as a courageous defender of women's right to institutionalized education and electoral representation. Another formidable advocate of women's education was Roshanak Nodust (1894–1959), founder of one of Iran's earliest girls' schools, the Saadat Nesvan, in 1917. Fluent in Persian, Arabic, French, and Russian, she is perhaps best known as the life force behind *Peyk-e Saadat Nesvan* (Association of Women's Wellness), a communist association of women, which was launched following the first congress of the Iranian Communist Party at Anzali Port in 1920 and took its name from Nodust's school. This association is credited with publishing Iran's first magazine in support of women's rights, also titled *Peyk-e Saadat Nesvan*. Qajar princess Taj al-Saltaneh (1883–1936) was the writer of an unfinished memoir that provided a glimpse into how the "woman question" played out during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11. Possibly written around 1914 at the request of a male cousin who was her tutor, al-Saltaneh's text is a stark portrayal of the plight of women at a tumultuous time in Iran's history, as also a fearless appeal for reform within the state ruled first by her father and then her brother.

The writers mentioned above wrote in a variety of fictional and nonfictional genres, including novels, allegorical tales, educational manuals, and travelogues, and were particularly skilled in the composition of short prose pieces in the manner of personal essays. Such essays, readings of which form the bulk of the fourth section of this article, were sometimes autobiographical and always argumentative. They were either derived from memoirs and treatises, or were stand-alone articles published in prominent periodicals of Tehran, Cairo, and Calcutta, among other sites within the Perso-Arabic sphere. Importantly, such essays were the nodes that joined together to build the *mehfil* that I introduce in this article, which itself is divided into four sections. In the first, I denote the contours of the Perso-Arabic sphere and explain the analytical function of the term. In the second, I discuss why the modality of the *mehfil* is appropriate to capture women's intellectual exchanges within this sphere. In the third, I explore how women writers from Bengal engaged with the wider world and developed familiarity and fellowship with influential Muslim women living and working in places far beyond Bengal. In the fourth, I demonstrate how a shared lexis of critique structures the argumentative nuances of texts by both sets of women writers.

The Space of the Perso-Arabic Sphere

Perso-Arabic, as the word suggests, is a linguistic category; however, it is not just that. It is also a geographical category encompassing parts of West, Central, and South Asia, and North Africa. Spatial imaginations of this kind have gained scholarly attention in recent world histories that are interested in shifting focus away from models of the globe based on colonial epistemology, the hemispheric myth, and the hegemony of the modern nation-state. Instead, such histories inaugurate models centralizing other kinds of connections between regions on the basis of trade routes and commercial activity, linguistic usage, and shared genealogies of rhetorical, artistic, and literary traditions. A pioneering concept in this direction is Sheldon Pollock's Sanskrit cosmopolis. Using the term to refer to large parts of southern Asia, Pollock highlights the way such regions encapsulated, between the fourth and fourteenth centuries, a sphere of circulation of Sanskrit texts above and across the world of vernacular tongues (Pollock 2006, 16, 21). Pollock points out how Sanskrit was "transregional" by nature, and how circulation of the entire corpus of Sanskrit texts created a network of shared idioms and ideas about aesthetic and political virtues (14). The conceptual metaphor of cosmopolis appeals to Pollock because a cosmopolis, like the ancient Hellenized world from which the word is derived, is fundamentally different from an empire; it is constituted not by force of arms, but by emulation, and without any governing center or fortified frontiers (19). The Perso-Arabic sphere is a spatial imagination of equal significance, constituted not by any military conquest or organized political power. However, it must be admitted that colonial modernity and the resulting rise of print technology affect the Perso-Arabic sphere in ways that are of interest to me, in terms of the creation of a women's print sphere within which demands for women's rights were articulated in conjunction with anticolonial critique. Unlike the Sanskrit cosmopolis, the Perso-Arabic sphere is not temporally delimited in a strict sense, even though a certain historical period of its existence is relevant to this article. Because of my focus on the colonial enterprise and its attendant effects on women's lives and work in Asia and Africa, I hesitate to use the term *cosmopolis* to refer to the Perso-Arabic.

Another point of difference between the Sanskrit cosmopolis and the Perso-Arabic sphere stems from the way the former is not tied to a single, scripture-based religion, whereas the latter is constituted specifically by parts of the world where Islam strongly contributes to philosophical, cultural, and creative contexts. In fact, it is on this basis that I include within the category of the Perso-Arabic historical sites associated with the origin and dissemination of Islam, such as Abbasid Baghdad, Mamluk Egypt, Safavid Persia, and the Ottoman Empire. I also include parts of the Indian subcontinent, such as Sindh, Awadh, and Golconda, where long-standing Muslim dynastic empires have left their unique civilizational influence, and where a major language of cultural expression is Urdu, which came into existence at the confluence of Arabic-Persian and Sanskrit-Sauraseni Prakrit in the thirteenth century and was then known by other names, notably Hindustani and Hindavi. My entry point into the Perso-Arabic sphere is through Bengal, as I have previously mentioned. Though the constitutive importance of Islam with respect to the Perso-Arabic cannot be disputed, this interregional and multilingual complex is neither identical to, nor a subset of, the *ummah* or the community of the faithful who have adopted Islam as their religion across the world. In fact, the role that Islam plays in the Perso-Arabic sphere cannot be understood in purely religious or spiritual terms; rather, it is best conceptualized as what Bruce Lawrence, following Marshall Hodgson, delineates as Islamicate

influence, constituting “a large repertoire of styles, resources, and practices, with the hybrid trace of Islam but not its announced presence or rejected absence” (Lawrence n.d., para. 19).

I acknowledge the analytical purchase of the concept of Islamicate influence, but Perso-Arabic is a stronger contender to foreground linguistic usage and literary cultures in the world I wish to evoke; this, in turn, is essential to my understanding of Muslim women writers’ use of a common vocabulary in articulating claims for gender justice, alongside anti-imperialist critique. The term Persianate is better suited than Islamicate to delineating literary genealogies and influence in this context. Richard M. Eaton proposes that Persianate culture flourished in most parts of West, Central, and South Asia between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries (Eaton 2019, 11). He observes that like the Sanskrit cosmopolis, the Persianate world was “grounded in a prestig[ious] language and literature that conferred elite status on its users” (13). He also outlines how, alongside Persian, vernaculars such as Turkish, Pashto, and Urdu, which draw aspects of their grammatical structure and many common expressions from Persian, flourished in these regions. Perso-Arabic, like Persianate, is an evocative shorthand to capture the intermixing and evolution of multiple linguistic and literary traditions within an interregional complex. To highlight the heterogeneity of such languages and cultures in West, Central, and South Asia, Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have formulated the hyphenated term Indo-Persian culture. This linguistic and geographical category is for them the basis of entry into a “shared . . . vocabulary . . . [manifested within] a literary canon that was transmitted, with the inevitable mutations wrought by time, from generation to generation” (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2007, 23). My project shares with Alam and Subrahmanyam’s work this emphasis on a shared vocabulary; however, unlike these scholars’ project, which centralizes orality and manuscript culture (24), mine pivots around the role of print in offering a base upon which older traditions of the performing arts and rhetoric were grafted in the form of the *mehfil*.

Terms such as Persianate and Indo-Persian culture cannot capture the role of Arabic literature and knowledge in configuring intellectual networks in Asia and Africa. Arabic, like Persian, was extremely influential across interregional spaces; in fact, it was so earlier than, and perhaps to a greater extent than, Persian. Right from the eighth century onwards, Arabic became the language of devotion, administration, and cultural capital in various regions beyond the Arabian Peninsula and west of the river Oxus, in what are today Iraq, Syria, Spain, Morocco, and so on (Lapidus 2002, 33–44). In Egypt, too, Islamization was not enabled through a Persophone culture, as in West, Central, and South Asia. Rather, it was Arabic that was the dominant language of intellectual and creative expression, including that of women such as Huda Shaarawi, who featured in colonial-era Bengali periodicals as a fixture at women’s conferences and a source of inspiration for her courageous stance on unveiling. The prevalence of Arabic, as opposed to Persian, in constituting cultural and creative contexts is also true of parts of southern India below the Deccan. There, the existence of scripts such as Arabi-Malayalam and Arabu-Tamil/Arwi attest to Arabic’s foundational role and continuing relevance. Ricci includes such regions in her formulation of the Arabic cosmopolis. Following Pollock, Ricci proposes a network of contact and exchange “among Muslim communities in South and Southeast Asia” based on shared literary inheritances (Ricci 2012, 331). Although the geographies that encompass Ricci’s Arabic cosmopolis do not coincide with those I include in the Perso-Arabic sphere, a point of congruence between her work and mine revolves around how we posit our

linguistic-geographical categories as sites where language and literature, rather than travel and trade (331), form the basis of interaction and meaningful exchange between geographically distant but culturally similar communities. I am, therefore, indebted to Ricci for providing me with an expansive and expository framework that emphasizes the textual without necessarily being attached to a material precedent or equivalent, for it is through texts that I plot the intellectual and interlocutory circuits of the *mehfil*, where Muslim women emerged as key players.

The Conceptual Metaphor of the *Mehfil*

The *mehfil*, within the purview of this article, is a space in which Muslim women from Bengal and other parts of the Perso-Arabic sphere gathered to exchange accounts of their negotiation with and self-representation within the patriarchal and imperialist societies that they occupied. In this, the *mehfil* was peripheral to exclusively male spaces of conversation, debate, and other intellectual engagement, such as *majlis* or *adda*, and was a means of brokering with the bounds of behavior considered acceptable for women amid such spaces. The *majlis* was an “important institution in the intellectual life” (Kenderova 2001, 184) of the courts of Abbasid Baghdad and medieval Persia. Literally meaning “a meeting” or “an assembly” (Hammond 2018, 284), a *majlis* brought together scholars, philosophers, and theologians to participate in “debates (*jadal*) and disputes (*munazara*) concerning literary, legal, religious, and other issues” (Kenderova 2001, 184). *Majalis* (plural) were also “setting[s] for . . . the exchange of pleasantries and witticisms witnessed, recorded in writing, and preserved for posterity in the form of anecdotes or *akhbar*” (Hammond 2018, 284). Though this anecdotal quality is preserved in Muslim women’s texts written during the heyday of colonial modernity, these women’s interaction within the *mehfil* did not match the publicness of the medieval *majlis*, its exemplary democratic composition and participation, or the extroverted articulation of opinions within it.

Dominic P. Brookshaw locates *majalis* “variously within the palace proper, mansions, hunting lodges, kiosks, gardens, and on the open plain” (Brookshaw 2003, 209). The use of gardens and other open-air venues in hosting *majalis* is replicated in the case of the larger and even more public fora known as *mushairas*, popular today in Urdu-speaking regions of South Asia: in “Delhi, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh in the north, and Hyderabad in the south. . . and of course in Pakistan” (Sequeira 1981, 2). Depicting the exhibitory publicness of *mushairas*, Isaac Sequeira points out how these symposia at which Urdu poets regale one another, as well as large gatherings of enthusiasts of Urdu poetry, often make use of public address systems and are broadcast via radio and television (2, 8). Carla Petievich and Max Stille, in fact, assert that *mushairas* are a “performance spectacle (*tamasha*)” (Petievich and Stille 2017, 73). Drawing on this performative aspect, Ali Khan Mahmudabad posits the *mushaira* as an archive that captured the spaces and manners of belonging of Muslim religious and political selves in the subcontinent at a time when such identity formations emerged as matters of public deliberation and contestation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mahmudabad 2020). The *mehfil* was also constituted around the same time, but was more centrifugal in its mode of intercourse and exchange with gendered Muslim subjects both within and outside the subcontinent. Whereas the *mushaira* of Mahmudabad’s project centralized the myriad modalities of Muslim religio-political identity within a specific regional and linguistic context, as I use the term, the *mehfil* focused on an interregional framework for its spatial imagination of

collectivity, as well as a multilingual framework to locate women's writing within literary cultures and print spheres that lent such writing its enduring value within a continuum of courtly patronage of the performing arts and rhetoric. What unites the *mushaira* and the *mehfil* in these contexts is their metaphorical quality to uphold models of Muslim modernity against hegemonic Hindu genealogies and understandings of the subcontinent in recent histories, such hegemony resulting in further marginalization of the gendered subjects who are the foci of this article.

The scaling up of audience size highlighted in the transition from *majlis* to *mushaira* in Urdu-speaking regions is reversed in the case of transition from *majlish* (a vernacularization of the Arabic/Urdu into Bengali) to *adda* within Bengali linguistic usage. Esha Sil defines the *adda* as a "long, informal talking session among friends, interspersing intellectual discussion and debate with gossip, rumour and small talk," and shows how this practice became popular in post-Partition Calcutta (Sil 2013, para. 1). Dipesh Chakrabarty clarifies how neither the word *adda*, nor the social practice it denotes, exist only in Bengali (Chakrabarty 2000, 183). Chakrabarty, in fact, quotes the Bengali author, journalist, and linguist Saiyad Mujtaba Ali (1904–74), claiming that that the men of Cairo were more devoted to the *adda* than were the men of Calcutta (183). Although Ali's playful account of *adda* in regions beyond Bengal does not disclose whether Egyptians knew it by the same name as Bengalis did, it does gesture toward the popularity of the *adda* within a site I have indicated as important to my delineation of the Perso-Arabic sphere. Chakrabarty identifies "universities, student dormitories, . . . restaurants, tea shops, [and] coffee houses" (207) as common sites of the *adda* and designates them as "spaces for the production of a modern Bengali reading public" (188). Thus Chakrabarty attributes to *adda* a literary flavor, one that is also associated with *mehfil* in my project. Whereas *adda* evokes the institutions of the literary and cultural sphere of late colonial Bengal, *mehfil* evokes older oral and textual traditions carried to circulation circuits within the subcontinent from erstwhile Arabia and Persia.

Describing women's role, or lack thereof, within a *majlis* or *adda*, Swati Moitra observes that women were considered a "peripheral or outright intruding presence" there (Moitra 2017, 640). Although male guests often "lost track of time and overstayed their welcome" (640), women were only ever called in to serve tea or snacks, and to do so silently and without interrupting the flow of conversation. Moitra asserts that, considering this "witty banishment of women" from the male terrain of *majlis* and *adda*, it is important to take into account forms of women's sociality that survived and thrived amid such terrain (640). *Mehfil* encapsulates such abiding modes of women's sociality in print. In contrast to the publicness of the *majlis*, the *mushaira*, and the *adda*, the *mehfil* was always an intimate affair. Moreover, the *mehfil* was, by some accounts, ambiguously gendered, and by others, a space associated exclusively with women's culture.

In this context, Katherine Butler Brown shows how the Mughal *mehfil*, although appearing at first to be a male space, was a site in which "Mughal conceptions of masculinity were . . . challenged" (Brown 2006, 67). In discussing why the Mughal *mehfil* appears to be a predominantly masculine space, Brown explains how social status itself was gendered in elite Mughal society. With respect to the *mirza* (patron), she observes that his assemblage of all elements of a *mehfil* within his home and his successful negotiation of the prescribed role of patron to performers in the *mehfil* "signified his mastery of elite male codes" (67). With respect to the performers, she underscores how they were also categorized as masculine because of their association with the elite and high musical prestige. Nevertheless, Brown delineates the Mughal *mehfil* a site of

subversion of “Indo-Persian discourses of gender and social status” (66). Drawing on Rosalind O’Hanlon’s work on the emotional and bodily engagement of performers and listeners in a *mehfil*, Brown demonstrates how performers “knowingly possessed and purposely exercised” an emotional power over the *mirza* and his circle of male friends, thereby subverting significant patriarchal and hierarchical codes of elite Mughal society (72). The Mughal *mehfil*, then, inherently had the potential to support a sociality that was no longer exclusively masculine, and to accommodate a supposedly more feminine engagement with the arts through emotional release. The *mehfil* I envision here, built through reading and discussion of women’s achievements in various parts of the Perso-Arabic sphere, is comparable in that it had the potential to support a form of women’s sociality that hinged on empathetic dialogue in print.

My own usage of *mehfil* borrows from women’s periodicals published in Islamicate spheres of colonial India. As I have mentioned, the women’s writing section of *Saogat* was known as “Zenana Mehfil,” roughly translatable as “soirée in the inner rooms” (Dutta Gupta 2010, 78). *Mehfil* also appeared in the title of the “letters to the editor” section of the pioneering Urdu women’s periodical, *Tehzib-un-Niswan* (The Cultivation of Women), founded by Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and his wife, Muhammadi Begum, and published from Lahore between 1898 and 1949. This section was called “Mehfil-i-Tehzib,” translatable as an assemblage of refinement (Minault 1998, 119). In both instances, the image of a *mehfil* or literary gathering emerges and is associated with writing for, and often by, women. In keeping with this image, the form of women’s sociality that I call the *mehfil* was pedagogic and transgressive, drawing on shared literary-cultural genealogies and espousing an insiderness and intimacy. The *mehfil*, therefore, did not merely fill seats at Western-model conferences and working parties in an additive manner; rather, it fundamentally altered women’s modes of communication in their sites of confluence, as I will show in the third section, and brought to the fore a set of concerns and political positions that such conferences and working parties did not voice, as I will demonstrate in the fourth.

(Mahila) Saogat: A Window into the Wider World from Colonial Bengal

The late colonial era, from about the 1860s onwards, is when periodicals catering specifically to a female readership emerged and started to gain popularity in Bengal. Krishna Sen contends that such periodicals were “a discursive forum in which to probe the parameters, as well as the desirability (or otherwise), of a reinscribed female sensitivity” (Sen 2004, 176). Among these periodicals, *Saogat* (Gift) was committed to publishing Muslim women’s writing to emphasize, in the words of its editor Mohammad Nasiruddin, their contributions as “enlightened and useful members of society” (quoted in Dutta Gupta 2010, 85). To this end, *Saogat* initially had a separate section devoted to women’s writing, and eventually started to receive so many articles by women that, in 1929, it launched a separate issue meant exclusively for women titled *Mahila Saogat* (Gift to Women). Eight issues of *Mahila Saogat* were published in the 1930s and 1940s. Here I focus on one of them to provide a glimpse into the kind of material that readers of the periodical were exposed to, and how such material facilitated their interaction with a world beyond Bengal.

The cover of the 1935 issue of *Mahila Saogat* features the illustration of an elite Muslim lady reclining on a divan, adjacent to a partly curtained window. Next to the divan is an ornate hexagonal side table with a vase on it. As the woman lies amid pillows of various shapes and sizes, she looks out the window to see a crescent moon rising over

the silhouette of a grand structure resembling a mosque or a Mughal-era palace with multiple domes and minarets. Two aspects of this illustration are noteworthy: first, its evocation of Islamic symbols and design; and second, the impression that the woman in the illustration has finished her chores for the day and has now found the time to relax and settle down with an issue of *Saogat*: a sentiment that, no doubt, some contemporary readers were invited to identify with. Such readers, like the woman on the cover, were “modern” Muslim women, educated and refined in their literary taste, who nevertheless inhabited the domestic space in a manner considered appropriate within emulative models of colonial modernity. The rigorous replication of these emulative models and tokens of cultural currency by women readers and writers of colonial-era periodicals reveals how classed participants in the *mehfil* ultimately propagated and supported the same kind of exclusivity for which first- and second-wave feminisms have received much critique.

Returning to the 1935 issue, I will discuss one essay and a few pictorial features among its contents. Raziya Khatun’s essay, a biographical piece on Khalida Adeb Khanum (1884–1964), is a detailed account of her birth, marriage, literary abilities, and contribution to Kemal Atatürk’s military regime, and identifies her as *Turki jatir janani* (the mother of the Turkish people) (Nasiruddin 1935, 419⁶). Khatun depicts how Khanum received both institutional and extra-institutional training in Arabic, Turkish, French, and English (421). She mentions that Khanum wrote novels, short stories, and one-act plays in Turkish and English and draws special attention to her 1926 autobiography in English: *The Memoirs of Halide Edib* (422). Khatun also mentions that Khanum worked as a teacher in a female normal school in Turkey between 1909 and 1914 (422). A large part of the essay is devoted to Khanum’s foreign travels and contains detailed descriptions of her time in Egypt, parts of Europe and America, and India (422–23). Khatun appreciates how Khanum started Turkey’s first women’s club during the Balkan War of 1912–13, and how this club opened a hospital to treat soldiers and sent many women health-care workers to the battlefield (423). The essay takes on a tone of awe as she lists all the roles that Khanum served in Atatürk’s administration after he became the first president of independent Turkey in 1923 and describes her efforts as *amanushik parishram* (superhuman toil) (423). Khatun sketches out every aspect of Khanum’s work as advisor to Atatürk on affairs of state, writer of reports and translator of government documents, and corporal in the army (423). Khatun ends with a description of that fateful moment when Atatürk conferred on Khanum the post of sergeant major and took off his own coat to place over her shoulders (423).

Khatun’s essay testifies to the print popularity of figures such as Khanum, whose name is Anglicized as Halide Edib, in early twentieth-century Bengal. Despite her location in faraway Turkey, her literary and military achievements emerged as common talking points among the readers of *Saogat* and other periodicals of the time. Edib may, in fact, be considered a celebrity of the *mehfil*, one who instigated exhilarating conversation and narratives of hope and ambition among the women who read and talked about her. Two years after the publication of this essay, in 1937, Edib published a travelogue in English titled *Inside India* (a critical edition of which was edited and published by Mushirul Hasan in 2002, and from which I quote in the rest of this section [Edib 2002]). In this text, she wrote at length about her arrival by ship in Bombay; about staying at Dar-us-Salam, the Delhi residence of her host, Dr. Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari (one of the founders of the prestigious Jamia Millia Islamia University); and about delivering lectures and interacting with students, political leaders, and women

activists in Aligarh, Lahore, Peshawar, Lucknow, Benares, Calcutta, Hyderabad, and Bombay. The publication of *Inside India* spurred even more conversation about Edib and ensured her persistence in public memory everywhere in colonial India, including Bengal. Particularly exciting for the purposes of this article is Edib's account of her "visit to a Purdah school for Muslem girls" in Calcutta, which she describes as being run by "an able and enterprising Muslem woman" (Edib 2002, 135). Without naming this woman, Edib depicts how "[s]he herself mixes with men but keeps her veil on" and how her "institution answers a definite need, for there are families among Muslems at Calcutta who do not care to have their daughters educated in the mixed colleges" (135). Edib's account thus demonstrates how some of Bengal's Muslim women, in addition to reading about accomplished women from other parts of the Perso-Arabic sphere, sometimes had the opportunity to meet such women in real life as well.

Edib, along with a number of other Turkish women, attracted significant attention within the pages of *Saogat*. Before the women's issue was introduced in the 1930s, general issues of *Saogat* known as *Saptahik* (Weekly) *Saogat* included a women's section titled "Zenana Mehfil," as I have mentioned in previous sections. "Zenana Mehfil" ran, in 1931, a multi-issue series titled "Turaske Nari Pragati" (Women's Progress in Turkey), focusing on eminent Turkish women's advocacy of paid employment for women. In this context, volume 4, number 3 features the views of Maleka Hanum, a graduate of Constantinople's American Girls' College and chief officer at the American Working House, which provided vocational training to young Turkish women; and Seliha Nafis Hanum, principal of Seljuk High School, who believed that work in the domestic space, including wifely responsibilities and child-rearing, ought to be given as much respect as other professions (Nasiruddin 1931a, n.p.⁷). Volume 4, number 4 features the views of Khasida Hanum, a Turkish barrister, who believed that women of all ages should seek salaried employment, unless they are married, at which point it is more appropriate for them to discuss scientific progress within the confines of their homes; Dr. Surat Rasim Hanum, a doctor at Turkey's Zenana Hospital; and Rafat Suraiyya Hanum, a graduate of Berlin University who had studied philosophy and was a theatre actress (Nasiruddin 1931b, 14–15). The 1935 issue of *Mahila Saogat* also contains a pictorial feature on women's progress in Turkey constituted by photographs of the country's first female judge, Sawaalhat Hilmi Khanum; a renowned Turkish poet named Mrs. Sa'ad Darvesh; Malek Hanum, daughter of a minister in Sultan Abdul Hamid's court; the famous Turkish journalist, Ismat Shiree Khanum; Mihri Wasim, founder of the National Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul; and a group of women civic volunteers marching in Istanbul (Nasiruddin 1935, 464–67). Another pictorial feature in the same issue revolves around women's progress in Egypt and consists of photographs of Zoghulul Pasha, who is considered the mother of Egypt; Huda Shaarawi, introduced as editor of the journal, *L'Egyptienne* (The Egyptian Woman), and Egypt's representative at a 1935 women's conference in Istanbul; Princess Abbas Hilmi Pasha; and Zakia Suleiman, introduced as an expert on education who had also visited India (505–7).

Interspersed among the pages of the 1935 issue are photographs of women belonging to the subcontinent's various royal families. Foremost among these is Princess Durrushehvar, photographed with her son and introduced as the wife of Prince Azam Jah Bahadur of Hyderabad (425). This marriage, along with that of Princess Durrushehvar's cousin, Princess Niloufer (both of whom hailed from the family of the last Caliph of Turkey), with the sons of the Nizam of Hyderabad, was the brainchild of Shaukat Ali, a founder of the Khilafat movement (Thatipalli 2020, paras. 1–3). This

movement was a protest campaign launched by Muslims in colonial India against sanctions placed on the Caliph and the Ottoman Empire after the First World War by the Treaty of Sevres. Ali, keenly attuned to the tenor of the times, arranged the aforementioned marriages to deepen the subcontinent's connections with the caliphate in a historical pattern of using women to forge alliances between powerful families and indeed, states. Princess Durrushehvar, in accordance with and perhaps exceeding Ali's expectations, captured the imagination of Indians, especially Muslim women, for her efforts to improve the lives of poor women in Hyderabad; she was admired and idealized for setting up a junior college for girls and a children's hospital in Purani Haveli (paras. 8–10). Photographs of such figures in colonial-era women's periodicals were visual referents to exceptional participants in the *mehfil* and their greatest achievements.

Texts and Generative Nuances

As the previous section shows, Bengali periodicals of the late colonial era were sites in which Muslim women witnessed and marveled at the literary and political activities of pioneering women from the larger Perso-Arabic sphere. Acquaintance with imaginative materials of this kind significantly affected such women's intellectual trajectories and textual output. As a result, early twentieth-century texts by Muslim women writers from Bengal and other parts of the Perso-Arabic sphere, though written in the context of different kinds of lived experiences and local grievances, employed a shared lexis of critique. I am interested in these writers' participation in and response to discourses of the modesty required of Muslim women in their sartorial choices, endorsement of indigenous products and technologies to counter the inequalities of an imperialist economy, and the gendered division of labor within and outside the household in colonized societies. The first of these, reformist discourse with respect to women's sartorial choices, is best understood through Fatima Mernissi's argument about the selective conservatism of Muslim societies faced with the colonial encounter. Mernissi contends that such societies resorted to a reiteration of tradition (Mernissi 1987, 96). However, this tradition seems to me a simulacrum, a copy without an original, having developed only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and specifically in response to the contingencies of colonial domination. The cupbearers of this new tradition were women, for male reformers of the time associated the domestic and the personal with women in an unproblematic and uncritical manner. In marking home as the ideal site for a proposed return to tradition, their reforms, Mernissi contends, penetrated every other site of colonial contestation, but were withheld in the domain of personal or private law (97). This form of tradition, adherence to which was mandated for women all over the Perso-Arabic sphere, was critiqued sharply in their writing. Such critique was especially incisive with respect to veiling.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) was acutely aware of how important it was to appear honorable in light of public sanction for the practice of veiling, especially for someone like herself who was in the public eye as a role model to students in her school. In order to display that she was indeed honorable enough for Calcutta's elite Muslim families to feel safe sending their daughters to her school, Sakhawat Hossain took a practical stand on *purdah* practices (Jahan 1988, 52). Always covering her head with the *anchal* or end of her *saree* while speaking at school, Sakhawat Hossain made sure no parents of students could object to her on grounds of indecent dress. The same is true of Roshanak Nodust (1894–1959). Although Nodust herself remained in *purdah*, she did not mandate that her students at Saadat Nesvan wear *hijab* (Zolghadr 2020,

para. 8). The voices of Sakhawat Hossain and Nodust are part of a chorus of women who espoused veiling on practical terms, and sometimes as an anticolonial practice, in the early twentieth century as various European colonies and protectorates were inching closer and closer to political freedom. In a lecture delivered in 1909 that later became part of her collection titled *Al-Nisaiyat* (Feminist Pieces), Bahithat al-Badiya (1886–1918) claims that veiling is necessary to counter the “excessive freedom” of European women, in favor of more conservative sartorial choices for so-called native women (Al-Badiya 2004, 234).

Taj al-Saltaneh (1883–1936) and Nazira Zain-al-Din (1908–76) are more discordant voices than the ones mentioned above, in that they disavow veiling in the context of the loaded and gendered discourse of modesty required of women in Muslim societies. Al-Saltaneh, in fact, designates veiling “the root of all the nation’s problems” and reads it as a metonym of “the backwardness and traditionalism of an outdated and corrupt feudal system in Iran,” one furthered by her dynasty’s male monarchs (quoted in Naghibi 2007, 41–42). Her stance on veiling has variously been read as parroting a contemporary colonialist agenda (Rahimieh 2001, 106, 116), and as an “underlying investment in the nationalist ideologies” of the Constitutionalist Period (Ghazimoradi 2016, 109). The link between Al-Saltaneh’s advocacy of unveiling and Iran’s nationalist revolution comes through strongly in the following assertion, attributed to her: “When the day comes that I will see my sex emancipated and my country on the path to progress, I will sacrifice myself in the battlefield of liberty and freely shed my blood under the feet of my freedom-loving cohorts seeking their rights” (quoted in Al-Qaiwani 2015, 72). Al-Saltaneh’s words, in fact, reveal the nexus between the Iranian state and early women supporters of unveiling, despite the divergence in their rationale. The state championed unveiled women as “modern” according to colonialist standards, but women such as Al-Saltaneh perceived unveiling as an effective measure against women’s seclusion.

Zain-al-Din, in an essay published as part of her controversial treatise *Unveiling and Veiling*, claims that “a piece of transparent material lowered over the face” cannot, in itself, guarantee the retention of a woman’s “honor” and “chastity” (Zain-al-Din 2004, 273). It was remarkable for a Lebanese woman to make such anti-*purdah* claims in 1928, and Zain-al-Din was much censured for them, as might be expected. Nevertheless, it is important to note how she critiques the custom of veiling without disputing the motivations behind it. Women must remain honorable and chaste, in Zain-al-Din’s opinion, but this cannot be guaranteed through veiling. In the same essay, Zain-al-Din asserts that, ironically, it is only the colonialists who seem not to dispute the efficacy of the veil (272). Indeed, it is an effective tool for them, using as they do the veiling of women in colonized societies as justification for their civilizing mission. In this, Zain-al-Din’s rejection of veiling, though rhetorically similar to Al-Saltaneh’s, is decidedly anticolonial, rather than mimicking existing colonialist attitudes. In fact, Zain-al-Din anticipates by over three decades Frantz Fanon’s reading of colonialists’ claim of unveiling women to save them from the tyranny of native male authority in “Algeria Unveiled” (which was published as part of collections of essays, first in French in 1959, and then in English translation in 1965 [Fanon 1965]). Exposing the hypocrisy of this aspect of the civilizing mission, Zain-al-Din points out how the average “westerner” is “only pleased with the beauty of the oriental veil while at the same time he would reject the veiling of his mother, wife, sisters, and daughters” (Zain-al-Din 2004, 272). Zain-al-Din, therefore, highlights how othering

happens through the use of discrete standards to judge colonial masters and their subjects.

The women writers of the *mehfil* had much to say not just about the gendered discourse of honor and chastity, but also about its disingenuous nature, which purports to hold women in high regard while simultaneously devaluing them. Writing in 1903 for the Bengali periodical *Nabanoor* (New Light), Sakhawat Hossain provides an example of this oxymoronic treatment of women in their conjugal relations. She argues that jewels gifted to women, apparently as a sign of respect and endearment toward them, are actually “badges of slavery” (Sakhawat Hossain 2008, 7). She contends that whereas the manacles and handcuffs of prisoners are made of iron, those of women are made of gold or silver. However, both serve the same purpose: enslavement. Sakhawat Hossain’s tone is one of scathing irony when she asserts that “our gem-studded necklaces are made in imitation of dog-collars” (7). Huda Shaarawi (1879–1947), writing about four decades later, in 1945, provides a personal account of feeling entrapped by her wedding jewelry in her Arabic memoir whose title has been translated as *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*. She recounts how she naively took pleasure in “the diamond and other brilliant jewels that crowned [her] head and sparkled on [her] bodice and arms” (Shaarawi 2004, 46). Soon she detected the error in believing that this jewelry was a boon, when in fact it was “a mask concealing the face of a condemned person approaching execution” (47). Shaarawi here equates marriage with death, and the jewelry gifted at her wedding with the chains that bind her in her last days before execution.

Aisha Ismat al-Taimuriya (1840–1902), writing in 1894–95 for the Arabic newspaper *Al-Adab* (Decorum), anticipates Shaarawi’s argument about jewelry being a blight upon women’s lives. Al-Taimuriya’s stance, however, is harsher when she contends that women derive from jewelry such sins as “self-admiration and vanity,” which can “cast those girls into the pit of evil” (Al-Taimuriya 2004, 130). Coupled with the disparagement of bodily embellishment that was typical of Islamic reformist writing, she claims that the “true adornment of humanity” is education, from which men have deliberately isolated women (132). The existence of a discourse in which religious prescriptions, and not legislative demands, shaped the agenda and concerns of women’s movements in the first half of the twentieth century comes to light with the inclusion of Muslim women writers as participants in such movements. A similar argument steers Joanna de Groot’s reading of the life and work of Qurrat al-Ayn (1814–52), leader of Iran’s Babi religious movement. De Groot observes that al-Ayn’s fashioning of the goals and objectives of the movement demonstrates how “Iranian women could forge their own paths, become cultural leaders and challenge gender norms” (De Groot 2010, 258). Nevertheless, such moves transcend any easy appropriation within the terms of early feminism, generally understood to be constituted by the campaign for women’s suffrage. Keeping in mind how major players in the *mehfil* similarly inaugurated and delineated movements rooted in Islamic reform and geared toward restoring women’s self-respect, I argue that their inclusion within narratives of our feminist pasts broadens our understanding of the myriad issues that animated first-wave feminisms.

Returning to my reading of the work of Muslim women writers from Bengal and other parts of the Perso-Arabic sphere, I want to highlight how, despite general discouragement of the use of bodily adornments, not all voices within the *mehfil* articulated an identical opinion on the matter. Sofia Khatun, writing for the Bengali periodical *Bharatbarsha* (India) in 1923, derides the use of imported British cosmetics by subcontinental women.⁸ In this, she does not object to women’s beautification through

artificial means per se. Rather, she urges her women readers to undertake an anti-imperialist practice by “giv[ing] up foreign cosmetics and adopt[ing] *shakha* [conch-shell bangles] and *sindoor* [vermillion]” instead (Khatun 1999, 160). Khatun’s essay was written in the aftermath of the Swadeshi Movement, a strategic campaign aimed at removing the Empire from power and improving economic conditions in India through the boycott of British products. In light of its date of publication, Khatun’s endorsement of indigenous products would not have surprised her contemporary readers, who were receiving the message of self-sufficiency behind Swadeshi through other channels as well. What is singular about her proposal, however, is that the products she endorses for her readers, likely to have included Muslim, Hindu, and Brahm⁹ women, were visibly symbolic of the Hindu wife, *shakha* and *sindoor* being adornments she wears after marriage. In the thick of Hindu–Muslim communal riots in the 1920s in Bengal, it is remarkable that a Muslim woman concedes a decidedly Hindu sartorial and ornamentation style to stand synecdochally for the larger category of Indian.

Khatun’s proposal espousing the use of indigenous adornments instead of foreign cosmetics is doubled in a proposal espousing the employment of indigenous educators as opposed to European educators for women students in the subcontinent. Khatun displays anxiety regarding the inappropriate education that women may receive from British teachers, or even Indian teachers who are not *ekebare bharatbasi* or absolutely Indian (158). In this context, she claims that if women are appropriately educated, then foreign literature will not impress them; in fact, they will not “attribute primacy to those countries’ culture and conduct” (160). Instead, Khatun opines, Indian women will admire Indian culture, judging it to be the best in the world (160). This almost reads like an anticolonial rejoinder to Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute upon Indian Education,” circulated about a century earlier, in 1835, in which Macaulay underscored how “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (Macaulay 1835, para. 10). Khatun intervenes in the devaluing of Indian literature, alongside other literatures of the Perso-Arabic sphere, to assert that each of these has intrinsic value and should be taught to native speakers in colonized countries, independent of curricular emphasis on European literatures.

Another participant in the *mehfil*, Al-Badiya, makes a strong case for the promotion and sale of indigenous products. In her previously mentioned 1909 lecture, Al-Badiya outlines how the use of indigenous products needs to move beyond individual consumption (as in Khatun’s schemata) and encompass a model of large-scale, near-universal consumption. Writing about advanced European machinery for silk production, Al-Badiya urges Egyptian manufacturers to buy the same machinery and manufacture indigenous products in the country (Al-Badiya 2004, 236). Rather than selling European products and making their colonial masters richer, she suggests that indigenous manufacturers can create a more equitable distribution of wealth in the colonies and protectorates by selling indigenous products. In the same lecture, Al-Badiya explains how the native elite, striving to become industrialized and modern according to Western standards, reiterate a gendered division of labor. Examining processual changes in cloth manufacturing since the introduction of industrial machinery, Al-Badiya observes how women earlier used to weave clothes for their families, but are now unable to, because men have invented machines for spinning and weaving (228). She makes two interconnected arguments here: one that draws a causal connection between the Industrial Revolution and greater gender inequality, and one that

explains the inevitable exploitation of women's labor within capitalist modes of production. With respect to the first, she holds Western civilization accountable for gender inequality since the Industrial Revolution originated there and was replicated in the colonies as a touchstone for progress and modernity. With respect to the second, she argues that as long as women had produced the fruits of their labor at home, they remained unpaid; and now that their products had begun to reach the market, they were paid in unequal gendered terms.

Using the conceptual metaphor of the *mehfil* to read texts by Muslim women writers juxtaposed against one another in this manner provides present-day readers with some purchase over the kind of anti-imperialist discourse they participated in. These readings are significant in light of what Marie Sandell identifies as a limitation of prominent twentieth-century women's organizations such as the International Council of Women and the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. Sandell observes that most of these women's organizations, with the possible exception of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, "remained silent on issues such as imperialism" (Sandell 2015, 73), despite becoming increasingly transnational in their membership in the early twentieth century and providing space for women from colonized geographies within their hallowed ranks. She attributes their lack of engagement with anti-imperialist discourse to two factors: first, their stated nonpolitical stance, and second, that "imperialism seemed to have little relevance for Western women who . . . continued to dominate these organizations" (73). Antoinette Burton challenges this perception of women's organizations as nonpartisan in the context of an imperialist agenda. She, in fact, suggests that the middle-class British feminists who headed many of these organizations participated wholeheartedly in the assumptions of the imperial culture in which they operated (Burton 1991, 47–48). Catherine Candy throws her weight behind this argument by demonstrating how British feminists deliberately excluded Indian feminists, who called for universal adult suffrage, from suffrage negotiations, in favor of conservatives who supported government proposals to extend the franchise of Indian women based on communal electorates (Candy 2001, n.p.).

In contrast to the manner in which imperialist concerns shaped the activities and overall politics of prominent women's organizations of the early twentieth century, the voices of women from the Perso-Arabic sphere foreground the interaction of anti-imperialist discourse with claims for gender justice. In doing so, such voices alter celebratory feminist histories, including known histories of the campaign for suffrage, while also resisting any easy equation of texts by women from colonized geographies with anticolonial nationalism. Readings of this kind do not account for an exhaustive, or even a representative, model of Muslim women's interregional ideational circuits. As one can imagine, there is much more archival material of this kind that is yet to be discovered. Nevertheless, inserting Muslim women into global intellectual history in this manner is significant in two ways. First, it points to the existence of intellectual networks that, by virtue of being in the Perso-Arabic sphere, transcend the apparently unidirectional flow of ideas from center to periphery sanctioned by colonial epistemology. Second, it provides an early model of women's collectivity that hinges not on demands for suffrage or other legislative reform, but on anti-imperialist discourse and critique of colonial patriarchy.

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Notes

- 1 Daniel Majchrowicz uses *mehfil* to propose a set of archival and conceptual practices aimed at addressing lacunae in research on women's self-narratives regarding travel in South Asia. The word is, for him, emblematic of what it meant to "travel as an everyday-woman in colonial India," how "travel [was] discussed by women" and how such "experiences [were] circulate[d]" (Majchrowicz 2020, 861).
- 2 For example, Murshidabad is the site of monuments such as Katra Masjid and Nizamat Imambara, which were built by Muslim rulers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- 3 *Kottha bhasa* is a dialect of Bengali with a large percentage of Urdu words, spoken in Murshidabad.
- 4 Sylhet Nagari script is an endangered writing system constituted by Arabic, Devanagari, and Eastern Nagari influences, mostly used to write *punthis* (cheap print titles).
- 5 This is likely the source that Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik drew on while naming their original Bengali-language anthology, *Zenana Mehfil: Bangali Musalman Lekhikader Nirbachita Rachana, 1904–38* (1998), whose English translation is titled *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904–1938* (2008).
- 6 I have cited all essays and pictorial features from women's issues and general issues of *Saogat* under the name of the periodical's editor, Mohammad Nasiruddin, since the authors of many such essays and features are unnamed.
- 7 Page numbers are not visible due to wear and tear sustained by the copy of *Saptahik Saogat* digitized and available on CrossAsia Repository.
- 8 All translations of the work of Sofia Khatun in this article are mine.
- 9 Brahmos were adherents of Brahmoism, a religion based on a form of reformed spiritual Hinduism with elements of Christian utilitarian faith and practice, founded by the Bengali social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828.

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