



# Women Making History

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**A MOST NOBLE LIFE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF ASHRAFUNNISA BEGUM (1840-1903) by Muhammadi Begum**  
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Women's role and contribution to Urdu literature and journalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century remains a relatively under-examined area. CM Naim's *A Most Noble Life: The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840-1903)*, makes an important intervention as it tells the tale of an extraordinary woman who was deeply devoted to the cause of women's education, and enriches the reader with a wealth of material that highlights the social, cultural, and literary context that shaped the contours of ordinary Muslim women's lives in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, there are several 'firsts' that mark the publication of this biography. Not only is it the first one written in Urdu by a woman; the biographer, Muhammadi Begum (1877-1908) is the first woman to edit a journal in Urdu, and Ashrafunnisa Begum taught at the first school for girls, the Victoria Girls' School, in Lahore. Translated by a well-known scholar of Urdu literature, this richly annotated and timely translation is a treasure-trove for scholars and readers and adds to the current scholarship on Muslim women in South Asia.

A fortunate stroke of serendipity brought Ashrafunnisa and Muhammadi together and it was mutual affection and admiration that led to a lasting friendship. The two women met at a betrothal party in Lahore on 20th **March 1898** and developed a lifelong bond. The trials and tribulations they faced in their personal lives led to instant affinity and the subsequent sharing of life story. Published in 1904, *Hayāt-e Ashraf*, 'the noblest life', records the life of Ashrafunnisa, an ordinary, non-elite, *sharīf* woman, who taught herself to read and write Urdu, battling several odds at home, and became a teacher. Bi Ashraf's inspirational life story serves as a role model for other women and the autobiographical essay, 'How I Learned to Read and Write' appeared in the journal *Tahzīb-e Niswāñ*, in two instalments (23rd and 31st **March 1899**), edited by Muhammadi Begum. The autobiographical essay was translated first by Professor Naim and published the *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 1987. The present book is the first complete translation of the biography with additional material that includes essays by

Ashrafunnisa Begum, essay on Victoria Girls' School, Muhammadi Begum's life, an Afterword that discusses two key issues of the time—women's literacy and widow remarriage.

The genre of biography was relatively new in the nineteenth century when Muhammadi Begum was writing, and it was Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), who contributed significantly to the emergence of the form of modern biography in Urdu with his well-known works like *Hayāt-e Sādi* (1881), the life of thirteenth century Persian poet Sāadi Shirazi, *Hayāt-e Javed* (1901), life of Syed Ahmad Khan and *Yadgar-e Ghalib* (1897), a memoir of poet Ghalib. Enriched with ethical reflection, biographical writing took several forms like didactic, religious, and genealogical and aimed to record model patterns of behaviour, moral virtues and aimed to edify the reader. Muhammadi Begum's biography follows the same pattern but breaks new ground by offering a window into the life of an ordinary woman. Beginning with a description of her ancestors and family, it moves on to detail her difficult childhood as she lost her mother when she was only eight years old. Much against the prevailing customs of the time, when women were only allowed to recite the Arabic of the Holy Quran and writing was strictly forbidden, Bi Ashraf taught herself to read and write Urdu stealthily, with much ingenuity and courage. The biography lists the qualities of Bi Ashraf, like piety, patience, generosity, strict observance of purdah, charity, kindness, devotion to duty, as worthy of emulation. Bi Ashraf stands tall because of her fortitude and forbearance in the face of adversity as she lost her husband at a very young age and later her two daughters. Following the death of her husband, Maulvi Alamdar Husain, who taught Arabic and Persian at Government College, Lahore, Bi Ashraf supports herself and her family, first with skills in sewing and lacemaking and later gets appointed as a teacher. Bereft of any familial and emotional support, she finds comfort in Muhammadi's warmth and affection, and the biography aims to honour her exemplary life and legacy. Bi Ashraf's contribution in shaping the lives of countless young girls in Victoria Girls' School, Lahore, has been noted by fellow teachers and Muhammadi Begum also took active interest in the school and even visited it. Such was the bond between the two women that when Bi Ashraf died, she published a moving piece commemorating their love in *Tahzīb-e Niswāñ*. We seldom come across a biography where the biographer's life is equally fascinating and illustrious as that of her subject. Professor Naim does justice to that by providing an account of Muhammadi Begum's life and her contribution to Urdu letters and journalism. Muhammadi's life was no less ordinary and other than editing the journal she was also a prolific writer of fiction, poetry, and instructional books for women. With their lives confined to home, magazines like *Tahzīb-e Niswāñ* encouraged women to write poetry and short fiction, though the pieces primarily sought to refine domestic virtues like patience, obedience, thrift, respect for elders, and kindness. Other than the biography, there are nearly twenty-two titles to her credit that are listed in the book, including books like *Sughar Beti* ('The Home Making Daughter', 1905) which was praised by Premchand for the values it instils in young girls. While there were several magazines like *Tahzīb-e Niswāñ*, Muhammadi Begum played a pioneering role in propagating the need for women's education and also reported the achievement of students in nearby towns in her journal. In recognition of her efforts for the betterment of women, Muhammadi Begum received a Certificate of Commendation from the Government of Punjab in 1908, together with a purse of 300 rupees. As per her wishes, Muhammadi Begum was next to Bi Ashraf in Lahore and the epitaph describes her as a woman 'whose heart was filled with empathy, and who suffered much and laboured hard for the benefit of daughters of India (*dukhtarān-e-Hind*)'.

In this small and perfectly formed book, Professor Naim contextualizes the debate on female

education and widow remarriage, two key issues raised in the biography that were high on the reformist agenda in nineteenth century India. Focusing on the fictional representation of women by Nazir Ahmed and Altaf Husain Hali who advocated women's education, the book discusses how these issues are reflected in their novels. Another important figure is Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi whose *Bahishtī Zewar* (1907), a book of instruction that emphasizes the need for educating Muslim women in their religion, gained such popularity that it became an almost essential part of the dowry that young women received at the time of marriage. Muhammadi Begum's poem titled, '*Ye Zewar Acche Haiñ*' (These Ornaments are Fine), that upholds good ethics and values as ornaments of women compared to the ones made of gold and silver impressed Thanawi so much that he included it in his collection. The plight of widows and widow remarriage, another prominent issue among Muslims of South Asia, is reflected in the works of Ahmed, Hali and in the pages of *Tahzīb-e Niswāñ*. Widow remarriage was almost forbidden in upper- and middle-class Muslim families and finds mention in Bi Ashraf's biography when their young teacher is thrown out by her grandfather once her remarriage is discovered.

The history of the reform movement in nineteenth century India is replete with references to male reformers who worked for the uplift of women but this unique biographical account shines a light on women who ushered in a spirit of reform by quietly contesting the confines of domesticity and also stepped out of the home to earn a living. While this book is much more than a biography, any discussion of the 'art of biography' brings to mind Virginia Woolf, who was not only a keen practitioner of the form but was also concerned with the figure of woman as a 'writer'. Talking about who is worthy of biography, Woolf observes, it 'is not anyone who has lived a life and left a record of that life worthy of biography—the failure as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? We must revise our standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration?' Indeed, this remarkable biography sets up the lives of ordinary Muslim women as worthy of admiration as they contribute towards social change by transforming the lives of fellow women.

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