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SISTERS IN THE MIRROR

A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism

ELORA SHEHABUDDIN

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Western feminists, pundits, and policymakers tend to portray the Muslim world as the last and most difficult frontier of global feminism. Challenging this view, Elora Shehabuddin presents a unique and engaging history of feminism as a story of colonial and postcolonial interactions between Western and Muslim societies. Muslim women,

like other women around the world, have been engaged in their own struggles for generations: as individuals and in groups that include but also extend beyond their religious identity and religious practices. The modern and globally enmeshed Muslim world they navigate has often been at the weaker end of disparities of wealth and power, of processes of colonization and policies of war, economic sanctions, and Western feminist outreach. Importantly, Muslims have long constructed their own ideas about women's and men's lives in the West, with implications for how they articulate their feminist dreams for their own societies.

Stretching from the eighteenth-century

SISTERS IN THE MIRROR



A HISTORY OF
MUSLIM WOMEN
AND THE
GLOBAL POLITICS
OF FEMINISM

ELORA SHEHABUDDIN

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ELORA SHEHABUDDIN

is Professor of Gender & Women's Studies and Global Studies at UC Berkeley. In addition to *Sisters in the Mirror*, she is the author of *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh* (Columbia University Press, 2008), and *Empowering Rural Women: The Impact of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh* (Grameen Bank, 1992). She has published articles in *Meridians*, *Signs*, *Journal of Women's History*, *History of the Present*, *Economic & Political Weekly*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Südasiens-Chronik [South Asia Chronicle]*, *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*, and *Asian Survey*, as well as chapters in numerous edited volumes. She was a guest co-editor of a special issue of *Feminist Economics* on "Gender and Economics in Muslim Communities." She currently serves on the editorial boards of *Journal of Bangladesh Studies* and a new Cambridge University Press book series titled "Muslim South Asia." She is Associate Editor (Central and South Asia) of the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*.

Prof. Shehabuddin received her A.B. in Social Studies from Harvard University and Ph.D. in Politics from Princeton University.

Enlightenment era to the War on Terror present, *Sisters in the Mirror* shows how changes in women's lives and feminist strategies have consistently reflected wider changes in national and global politics and economics. Muslim women, like non-Muslim women in various colonized societies and non-white and poor women in the West, have found themselves having to negotiate their demands for rights within other forms of struggle—for national independence or against occupation, racism, and economic inequality. Through stories of both well-known and relatively unknown figures, Shehabuddin recounts instances of conflict alongside those of empathy, collaboration, and solidarity across this extended period. *Sisters in the Mirror* is organized around stories of encounters between women and men from South Asia, Britain, and the United States that led them, as if they were looking in a mirror, to pause and reconsider norms in their own society, including cherished ideas about women's roles and rights. These intertwined stories confirm that nowhere, in either Western or Muslim societies, has material change in girls' and women's lives come easily or without protracted struggle.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELORA SHEHABUDDIN REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM JADALIYYA, AN EZINE PRODUCED BY THE ARAB STUDIES INSTITUTE

Jadaliyya (J): What made you write this book?

Elora Shehabuddin (ES): I first started thinking about this project over a decade ago when, like many friends and colleagues, I was becoming increasingly frustrated by the nature of the dominant discourse about Muslim women. I am thinking specifically of certain bestselling Muslim (or ex-Muslim) writers whose calls for reform in Muslim communities were intertwined with US power and support for the US government's domestic and foreign policies. At the same time, while many academic colleagues responded brilliantly and promptly to the deluge of a certain kind of popular books on "oppressed Muslim women," I sensed there was room and a need for a longer historical approach, one that showed how Western ideas about Muslim women—and Muslim ideas about Western women—had undergone various shifts over the centuries.

J: What particular topics, issues, and literatures does the book address?

ES: In *Sisters in the Mirror*, I argue that feminist movements in the Anglo-American West and in Muslim South Asia have developed in tandem rather than in isolation—and indeed helped to construct one another. I try to show how Western ideas about Muslim women have long shaped the history of Western feminism and how these same ideas, combined with Western political and economic power and Muslims' ideas about Western men and women, have also influenced feminist ideas and activism in Muslim societies. This book, then, traces the entangled histories of representations of Muslim and Western women since the sixteenth century and the intertwined histories of movements for women's rights in the West and the Muslim world since the late eighteenth century. I end the book in the early twenty-first century, which has seen increased Western political, social, economic, and military presence in the lands where Muslims have historically lived,



Peace Corps volunteer Florence McCarthy in a village woman's home, as women share what they have learned from their weekly training at the Comilla Academy. Photo by Charles Harbutt. Charles Harbutt Estate and Joan Liftin.

but also a growing Muslim presence in Europe and North America that blurs the very distinction between so-called "Muslim" and "Western" contexts. (Of course, I use such terms as "West," "Western," and "Muslim" for convenience and not because I see the West and the Muslim world as distinct, unchanging, monolithic entities engaged in a pre-ordained civilizational clash. Nor do I wish to suggest that the Muslim world is more religious than the West.)

Taking a historical perspective has allowed me to historicize the emergence of ideas about gender equality in both the West and the Muslim world and to track changes over time in these ideas in relation to larger changes in relations between these different contexts. Recounting this history from the vantage point of South Asia has allowed me to provide an important complement to much academic and popular writing on Islam and Muslims that is overwhelmingly focused on the Arab world, Iran, and Turkey. The story of Muslims in South Asia is significant

not only for their demographic weight but also for the region's particular experience of Islamization, its long history of interaction with colonial and non-colonial European powers, its religious diversity, and its strategic location in current Western security and development concerns. Within South Asia, I focused on the Muslims in Bengal, across its incarnations as East/ern Bengal in the British colonial period, East Pakistan (1947–71), and finally Bangladesh (since 1971).

I traced this long and entangled history primarily through accounts of encounters between Bengali and English and, later, American men and women. By starting the story before the period of formal

British colonialism in South Asia, I was able to pay attention to an era marked by power relations between the British and South Asian Muslims that was very different to what would emerge in the late eighteenth century. By bringing these different contexts—Britain, Bengal, and, after the mid-20th century, the United States—into one transnational analytical frame, my goal was to show how and why ideas and efforts to improve women's lives in even these geographically distant parts of the world have long been interconnected and interdependent.

Throughout the book, I interweave stories of conflict—of orientalism, condescension, colonialism, and racism—with stories of encounters that led writers from Britain, Bengal, and the United States to pause and reconsider norms in their own society, especially cherished ideas about women's roles and rights, much as one might discover imperfections when studying oneself in a mirror.

To bring these different histories together, I have had to bring together



Bengali Woman, 1850. Fanny Parkes, Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque.

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— AWARDED THE
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"ANANDA KENTISH
COOMARASWAMY
BOOK PRIZE (SOUTH
ASIA)" FOR 2023

The Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy Book Prize honors a distinguished work of scholarship in South Asian Studies that promises to define or redefine the understanding of whole subject areas. The committee particularly seeks nominations of broad scholarly works with innovative approaches that may concern any topic in any discipline or may cross disciplinary lines.

— SELECTED AS "CHOICE
'S OUTSTANDING
ACADEMIC TITLE FOR
2022" BY THE AMERICAN
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[Citation] Using vignettes as the literary device of choice, Shehabuddin brings readers directly into the lives of these women, a rare treat in itself. She crafts a multi-angled history of feminism that includes women from two colonial countries and Bengali women from the Enlightenment to the present. Many readers of Indian or Pakistani history will be amazed at the quality of research and the connections uncovered in this text. . . . This is an extraordinary and exemplary use of vignettes to sustain women's voices over centuries and highlight interconnectedness, intimacy, and global awareness. . . . A must read.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

*Shehabuddin provides an important analytical framework for understanding the intertwined experiences and political mobilizations of women across borders. A deeply researched and illuminating account of transnational feminist encounters, *Sisters in the Mirror* will undoubtedly raise our consciousness about seemingly disparate trajectories of social movements in various geopolitical contexts. This is a beautifully written book that centers diverse voices of women who are influencing national, regional, and global politics.*

— Elora Halim Chowdhury, Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston

Sisters in the Mirror breaks the pattern of using the anglophone feminist scholarship as the preamble for any work about gender studies. The choice of sources is bold and thought-provoking. Through the fluid narrative of the book, these isolated examples are knit together to highlight the challenges of Islamophobia today and its historical roots.

— Gender, Place and Culture

Drawing on various historical texts and, importantly, writings by South Asian Muslim women and men, Shehabuddin traces a genealogy of representations by and about Muslim women. This is a long overdue, powerful, and necessary intervention in feminist history on gender, religion, and colonialism, and emphasizes why transnational feminist accounts must attend to the locations and contexts out of which differing and entangled representations emerge.

— Inderpal Grewal, Professor Emeritus of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Yale University

This foundational text marks a significant contribution to feminist debates and Muslim women's writing and is an incredible resource for students and researchers working in the field of global/transnational feminism and South Asian Muslim women. It provides a compact history of contemporary women's rights movements in the West and beyond.

— The Daily Star



Eleanor Roosevelt with local hosts on the Mary Anderson, Dacca, February 1952. Courtesy of Nasreen Shams and Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury.

United States. In an effort to produce a smoother text, however, I chose to identify these works in the numerous endnotes and extensive bibliography rather than in the main text.

J: How does this book connect to and/or depart from your previous work?

ES: While I have long been interested in Muslim women's political mobilization, especially in South Asia, in *Sisters in the Mirror* I broaden the scope across time and space to examine both the deeper history of reform and activism for and by South Asian Muslim women and the expansive international connections forged by these reformers and activists. Methodologically speaking too, while my past work had relied on ethnographic work among Bangladeshi impoverished rural women with little

theoretical approaches, methodologies, and research that have generally not been put in dialogue across boundaries of disciplines, historical periods, and area studies. I drew heavily on the theoretical frameworks of early modern, colonial, postcolonial, and transnational feminist studies, especially critical analyses of gender, empire, and travel, and the rich histories, ethnographies, and literary studies of and across South and West Asia, Europe, and the



Razia Khatun Chaudhurani (1907–1934), a 1933 painting commissioned in Calcutta. Courtesy of the Chaudhury family.



DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) meeting in Bergen, Norway, in 1984, in preparation for the 1985 Nairobi UN Conference for Women. Courtesy of Hameeda Hossain.

formal education, this book's historical and transnational lens led me to rely largely on sources produced by educated elite women in all three contexts (Bengal, Britain, and the United States). Finally, in some of my other work, I have focused on women in faith-based movements, but most of the characters in this book, whatever

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK



Karimunnesa Khanam (1855–1926).
Courtesy of the Ghuznavi family.

their personal commitment to Islam or any other religious tradition, engage in activism inspired by more secular frameworks. By juxtaposing activists of similar elite backgrounds in these different contexts, I hope to complicate the religious and pious Otherness that is often attached to Muslim women—to the exclusion of power, history, politics, and economics, and to such an extent that their “Muslimness” overshadows all other aspects of their lives.

J: Who do you hope will read this book, and what sort of impact would you like it to have?

ES: I hope that fellow scholars in Middle East studies (broadly defined), Islamic studies,

South Asian studies, and women’s and gender studies will engage with this extended, entangled gendered history of efforts to improve women’s lives in Muslim South Asia and the Anglo-American West. In addition, I have tried to write the book—the language, structure, tone, and chronological sequence—in a way that I hope makes it appealing to any reader open to thinking beyond popular binaries of Islam versus the West, and beyond culturalist explanations for the different histories of feminism in different parts of the world.

I hope the stories of struggle for women’s rights across the pages of this book will make clear that no society has a monopoly on ideas about gender equality, or justice and fairness more generally, or on violence and aggression; that struggles to improve women’s lives have not been easy anywhere; that our histories and futures are connected and interdependent; and that an awareness of this long and entangled history should lead us beyond both self-congratulation and despair. It is through struggles rooted in solidarity, understanding, and shared knowledge that we can strive most effectively for a more just world.

J: What other projects are you working on now?

ES: As I was completing *Sisters in the Mirror*, I realized the urgent need for a feminist history of what is today Bangladesh that would go beyond the usual nationalist and development narratives that prevail in much of the scholarship on that country. My new book project traces the history of women’s activism in East Pakistan/Bangladesh and examines the nature of local, national, and transnational activism for women’s rights; how activists have negotiated their identities—as Bengali, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Third World, secular, religious, and Muslim—at different moments; and how transnational interactions and international interventions have shaped their priorities.



“Fazilatunnesa Zoha, M.A.” *Saogat* 11, no. 9 (1935): 480. Heidelberg University Library.

An exciting and original contribution to the global history of feminist thought. Through a focus on the two-way gaze and the interplay of ideas between Bengali and Anglo-American thinkers, Elora Shehabuddin makes a compelling case for the ways global feminism was shaped over time by East-West interactions in the form of mutual influences, reciprocal learning, and a fair amount of misapprehension. She enlarges our vision of feminism and its modern history by telling a hitherto neglected transregional story.

— Judith E. Tucker, Professor of History, Georgetown University

Sisters in the Mirror provides us with a new way to read and interpret the centuries-old Western-Muslim binary that has been historically constructed, fiercely debated and politically used in favour of colonialism and imperialism.

— South Asian History and Culture

Shehabuddin compellingly explores the tangled story of feminist movements in the West and in Muslim South Asia and their secular expressions. Digging deep into history, Shehabuddin tells the stories of individual women’s writings from the sixteenth century to the present and shows how the politics of colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonialism have shaped women’s struggles for gender equality within their societies in Bangladesh, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

— Yasmin Saikia, Professor of History, Arizona State University

Drawing on various historical texts and, importantly, writings by South Asian Muslim women and men, Shehabuddin traces a genealogy of representations by and about Muslim women. This is a long overdue, powerful, and necessary intervention in feminist history on gender, religion, and colonialism, and emphasizes why transnational feminist accounts must attend to the locations and contexts out of which differing and entangled representations emerge.

— Inderpal Grewal, Professor Emeritus of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Yale University

BOOK EXCERPT

THE PLIGHT OF MUSLIM WOMEN AS "A STICK WITH WHICH TO BEAT ISLAM"

(from Chapter 8, pp. 252-257)

[Taslina] Nasreen's *New York Times* op-ed had been arranged by Meredith Tax, a New York–based writer and veteran of the US women's movement. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1942, Tax had moved east to attend college at Brandeis and then on to London on fellowships. The distance from home helped sharpen her perspective on the United States, as she later recalled, "The thing about being in a foreign country is you see your country from afar and so you see everything that everybody else is saying about it." In London she participated in antiwar protests in front of the US embassy before she decided, "It was clear

that if you wanted to build your life around being anti-imperialist and fighting the war in Vietnam, the U.S. was the place to do it, not England, at least if you were American." Upon her return Tax became increasingly involved in the US women's movement and, in 1967, cofounded Bread and Roses, the first socialist women's organization in the country. Outraged by the low number of women speakers at the 1986 Congress of International PEN, the international literary and human rights organization, Tax and a group of women including Grace Paley, Margaret Atwood, and Betty Friedan began a push for a women's committee. The PEN Women Writers' Committee was finally approved five years later.

The first case that Tax, as the new committee's chair, took up was that of five Croatian women writers, who had been harassed in the Zagreb press for writing about the wartime rapes and corruption in the former Yugoslavia. Disagreements with PEN led Tax and others to start an independent organization, Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature, and Development (Women's WORLD), that would focus on "gender-based censorship." In the midst of these activities, in late September 1993 the London PEN office forwarded to Tax a brief wire story about a Bangladeshi woman writer who had received death threats and asked her if she wanted "to do anything about it." Tax later acknowledged that the timing could not have been better. A case like Nasreen's would give her new organization precisely the kind of attention it needed to establish itself. She sought the help of feminists in Bangladesh to contact Nasreen, and within three days she reached Hameeda Hossain, veteran of the Mexico City and Nairobi conferences and a founder of DAWN and the legal-aid organization Ain-o-Salish Kendro, who responded with Nasreen's fax number.

Although Nasreen's writing had been controversial—but also admired—within Bangladesh in the late 1980s, a major literary award in West Bengal in 1992 and then her 1993 novel *Lajja* (Shame) brought her a new regional level of notoriety. *Lajja* told the story of anti-Hindu violence by Muslims in Bangladesh following the Babri Masjid demolition in India. While the Bangladesh authorities banned the novel because they were concerned it would inflame Hindu-Muslim tensions, the Hindu nationalist Bharata Janata Party (BJP) in India distributed very cheap pirated copies to draw attention to the situation of the minority Hindu population in Bangladesh. Not surprisingly, the BJP's endorsement only further infuriated both the Bangladesh government and Bangladeshi Islamists. Then, in May 1994, just as the furor began to die down, Nasreen gave an interview—and an equally controversial rejoinder—in the BJP-owned Calcutta newspaper the *Statesman*. The paper quoted her as saying that the Quran was written by a human being and required a total revision. In her rejoinder just two days later, she clarified that *all* religious texts lacked contemporary relevance and said it was time to turn instead to humanism. New death threats ensued, and the government charged her under the colonial-era Penal Code with having offended religious sentiments, forcing her into hiding.

Nasreen's global fame came as a surprise to critics and supporters alike, in Bangladesh as in the West. As Tax later put it, very little of her work had been translated into any of the "power languages." Nasreen had never traveled beyond India when the crisis erupted nor, as she told Mary Anne Weaver of the *New Yorker*, even met a non-Bengali until 1993. Looking back on the intense drama of those years, Tax remembered how "the reporters I talked to seemed to want to use the story as a stick with which to beat Islam; I would talk about the rising tide of all kinds of religious extremism, Christian, Jewish and Muslim; but none of that ever got into a story. The Western press tended to portray [Nasreen] solely as a victim and symbol of the oppression of Muslim women, downplaying her courage and ignoring the work of the Bangladeshi women's movement." Tax's later statements notwithstanding, the new popular concern with Muslim women's oppression made it easier for her to help Nasreen in those early years.

In the summer of 1994, Nasreen went into hiding in Bangladesh to avoid arrest for offending religious sensibilities. Hameeda Hossain's husband, Kamal Hossain, who had chaired the country's Constitution Drafting Committee in 1972, and their daughter, Sara Hossain, both highly respected lawyers, led the legal team defending Nasreen against the government's charges. Nasreen managed to send out faxes to her European and US

supporters, pleading for help, and this launched a massive letter-writing campaign, similar to that undertaken for Rushdie following Khomeini's fatwa. Gabi Gleichmann, the head of Swedish PEN, who headed the campaign, later conceded he might have "overestimated the threat and in a way we destroyed her life." Susan Sontag, Milan Kundera, John Irving, Norman Mailer, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Günter Grass were among the several thousand writers who wrote to Bangladesh's prime minister, Khaleda Zia, asking her to help Nasreen in the spring of 1994. So eager were they to save this writer from the threat of fundamentalist Islam that they did not pause to think that Bangladeshi law might protect her if allowed to run its course. Instead, the overall effect of the letters was to portray Bangladesh as dominated by extremist Islamic ideology and Nasreen a solitary soldier in the fight against that ideology. This obscured the presence in Bangladesh of a vibrant secular movement, a legal system (even if sometimes imperfect), and a strong women's movement. In mid-July Salman Rushdie's open letter to Nasreen appeared in several newspapers, including the *New York Times*. Tax and other women activists were furious that Rushdie had been brought in: "Well, this was the last thing in the world that Taslima needed. I mean she had enough trouble without being associated with Salman Rushdie." The efforts of Nasreen's legal team and Bangladeshi activists, combined with international pressure, compelled the government to allow Nasreen to leave the country in early August 1994 to attend a conference in Sweden. She would not return for several years.

Before Taslima Nasreen several writers in Bangladesh had received fatwas and death threats from Islamists, among them Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Imam, but they had continued their usual writing, activities, and activism undeterred. They did not reach out to Western media or human rights organizations, nor did their stories capture the Western imagination. Nasreen's case, however, evolved very differently because of her particular decisions and actions in that historical moment and geopolitical context.

...

Khushi Kabir, a staunch feminist who had been involved in grassroots work in rural Bangladesh since the early difficult days right after the war of independence, tried to make sense of the ambivalence toward Nasreen among members of the women's movement: "Taslima went for the jugular, and we're not ready for that. There's simply too much at stake. You have to learn how to deal with the situation—how to handle the bearded ones. And this is something that Taslima never understood." Many worried that by inciting the rage of the Islamists, she was making things worse for the majority of women in the country, who were impoverished and lived in rural areas. Millions of women were struggling to overcome local objections from their families, neighbors, and often religious leaders to join NGOs whose funding came largely from Western governments and foundations. Feminists worried that Islamists enraged over Nasreen would turn their wrath to these NGOs, as many already had, and thereby threaten their work in the countryside. Kabir herself had started in 1972 with BRAC (originally short for Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, but now known simply as BRAC), today the largest NGO in the world, but, as she became concerned that BRAC was increasingly focused on delivering services to the poor rather than tackling the bigger questions of exploitation and corruption, she moved to the NGO Nijera Kori (We Do It Ourselves), which facilitates men and women's autonomous political organizing at the grassroots level.

...

At the same time it is indisputable that Nasreen's early writings—in particular, her weekly columns for Bengali readers in a Bangladeshi newspaper—struck a chord among readers. Her frank and detailed discussions of sexual harassment in public spaces was a revelation for many women who had themselves suffered these assaults. Bangladeshi writer Shabnam Nadiya later recalled that she had read the great Western feminists like De Beauvoir, Friedan, and Millett, and even Begum Rokeya [Hossain], with great interest, but she had "consumed, judged and digested [them] at some intellectual level, connected to but not truly part of what it meant [to be a] woman . . . in Dhaka, on the bus, in rickshaws, in school, at home every day." Then she had encountered Nasreen's book *Nirbachito Kolum* (Selected columns) in the late 1980s and realized, "Taslima was the real thing...for me and countless others of my generation. We might not have agreed with everything she said, but that she said those things at all was, for then, enough."



"Unholy Matrimony," by nationally syndicated Indian cartoonist Enver Ahmed, from his 1971 booklet, *The Anatomy of Betrayal*.

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Greater Than Fear. Art by Shepard Fairey for Amplifier.org

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HISTORY OF MUSLIM WOMEN
AND THE GLOBAL POLITICS
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PREVIEW INTRODUCTION

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