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[Zubeida Mustafa](https://www.dawn.com/authors/975/zubeida-mustafa) Published August 12, 2022

Zubeida Mustafa

IN South Asia’s patriarchal societies, writings by women giving their perspective on sociopolitical issues in the early 20th century are not easily available. Diaries are even rarer. Happily, we now have a valuable addition to this genre. It is a diary introducing us to the views of a 24-year-old woman from Hyderabad Deccan, who went to England for further studies. It was my privilege to have a trained preforming artist, Shama Askari, read it out to me.

Muhammadi Begum, the author, began writing her account in January 1935. For reasons not explained, she abandoned this exercise nine months later and never spoke about it again. Nevertheless, the book is a mine of information for anthropologists. Four years after her death in 1990, a cousin handed over a notebook to Zahra Masroor, the eldest daughter of the author. Thus a well-kept secret came to light. Written in chaste Urdu, the diary made fascinating reading. Our children should read this to understand their grandmother, Zahra thought. Realising that Urdu was fast losing ground, she decided to translate it into English, with her sisters, Zainab and Kulsoom, helping. The original Urdu version is expected to be published soon locally. The English translation is available (Primus Books, India).

Titled A Long Way from Hyderabad: Diary of a Young Muslim Woman in 1930s Britain, this book records the activities and observations of Muhammadi Begum. The author had topped in her B.A. examination at Osmania University in 1932 and won a scholarship to study in Oxford where she went accompanied by her husband, Jamil Husain. The oldest two of her children were born during her three-year stay in England.

Muhammadi Begum had a passion for writing. This was not surprising as she was the daughter of Qaiseri Begum, the author of Kitab-i-Zindagi, which Zahra Masroor had published in 2003. It had been serialised in the literary magazine Urdunama. The mother-daughter duo inherited the writing gene from their illustrious ancestor Maulvi Nazir Ahmad, a literary giant of Urdu literature.

Who was the real Muhammadi Begum?

It is said that in those days even educated women had no opinion of their own on issues of public interest. Muhammadi was erudite and eloquent on colonisation, education, social justice, etc. Here are some instances.

On colonisation: With reference to the unhelpful attitude of the ‘nasty’ and ‘mean’ secretary of the Indian delegacy in her admission to the college of her choice, she wrote, “Had we been less dependent and more self-reliant we would not have been made to feel so subservient”. The “unfairness of colonial rule” she said, drove people to “live on the margins of society”.

On education: She was impressed by the use of museums for education. Our students, she said, resorted to “dry exercises and rote learning of written material. They grasp or retain nothing”. She asked: “Why is education not compulsory for all?”

On inequity: “It is always the influential who get away with murder while the wretched have only God to come to their aid.”

Prof Daniel Majchrowicz, who wrote the introduction, finds the book to be an “unvarnished narrative of everyday life in an intellectual and social world”.

Who was the real Muhammadi who coped with the challenges of daily life? There were two phases in her post-Oxford life. In Hyderabad, where she lived until 1950, she had the typical lifestyle of an affluent, educated family. Running a huge household of eight children and a large domestic staff must have taxed her management skills and time. Yet she continued to nurture her versatile social network that involved travelling and meeting high-profile personalities. At her initiative, the Quaid visited Hyderabad to ad­­dress a public meeting in 1945.

The second phase came when Jamil migrated to Pakistan in the wake of the Indian ‘police action’ in Hyderabad in 1948. Muhammadi’s journey to Lahore in 1950 was uneventful and soon enough the family was settled in a spacious house. But life changed dramatically. It was the trauma of the Partition transition that tested her courage. Her spirituality and intellect sustained her when many others would fall. Simplicity being at the core of her being, she negotiated the transition with dignity. She adjusted to government service — living for four years in Karachi to give Jamil a helping hand to meet the family’s growing needs. After his death in 1958 she became the sole breadwinner. Post-retirement 12 years later, her life centred round the activities she enjoyed, meeting family and friends, collecting anything printed on paper such as letters, recipes, religious poems, etc. She continued to read avidly.

But she never returned to writing for publication. What happened to the passion for writing that had gripped her in Oxford? We will never know as she never communicated her personal feelings to anyone.

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