

Nazia Akhtar, *Bibi's Room: Hyderabad Women and Twentieth-Century Urdu Prose*. Orient Blackswan & The New India Foundation, 2022, 432 pages, ₹995. ISBN: 978-9354420641.

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The last 15 years have been good for English scholarship on Urdu literary cultures: several excellent studies and translations have been published, of canonical as well as long-forgotten work. The field continues to expand with the addition of Nazia Akhtar's tidily put-together and beautifully produced book.¹ *Bibi's Room* begins to fill some major gaps in the field by taking us south of the Vindhya to Hyderabad and introducing three of the best-known Urdu women writers of the Deccan to a larger readership: Zeenath Sajida (1924–2009), Najma Nikhat (1936–1997) and Jeelani Bano (b.1936). The threads that tie their work together, Akhtar argues, are an immersion in the cultural milieu of Hyderabad, and their kinship with the ideas fostered by the Progressive Writer's Movement.

The book has an intricate structure. There are six chapters in all, but one could classify them into a two-part, non-chronological division of subject and scope. One part would include the first two chapters and the substantial conclusion, and we could count chapters three to five, dedicated to Sajida, Nikhat and Bano, respectively, in part two. Each of these chapters begins with Akhtar's translation of one piece of writing—an essay, or more accurately a 'thought piece' (Sajida), or a short story (Nikhat)—followed by an interpretation of the translated piece, a biographical sketch followed by a discussion of the writer's body of work, including the main themes and detailed summaries along with analyses of individual stories/essays.

Akhtar begins by situating her work within the three broad fields of contemporary feminist scholarship, Urdu literary studies and histories of Hyderabad. Hers is a piece of feminist scholarship in the tradition of (Hyderabad-based) classics like *We Were Making History* and the two volumes of *Women Writing in India*. The book aims at a dual 'recovery': while these women's voices are relegated to the margins of the literary canon, their work, Akhtar suggests, also offers a powerful corrective to historical accounts of Hyderabad life and politics in the mid-twentieth century. Aside from the patriarchal bent of the canon, then, the dominant discourses against which Hyderabad women writers' work in Urdu must be understood include nationalist histories of state formation as well as histories of Urdu literature (of which, be it noted, there are not very many).

If the one simplifies the cultural dynamics of princely states like Hyderabad, the other seems nervous to leave the environs of the Indo-Gangetic plain, much to the annoyance of generations of Deccani litterateurs.

The choice of pieces to translate is inspired by these considerations. All three were invested in writing about aspects of Hyderabad's past and contemporary culture, with particular emphasis on that quintessentially 'progressive' subject: hierarchies of class and gender. The selection in *Bibi's Room*, however, is far from predictable. The redoubtable Zeenath Sajida's piece 'If Allah Miyan Were a Woman' (Agar Allah Miyan Aurat Hote), Najma Nikhat's story, 'The Last Haveli' (Aakhri Haveli) and Jeelani Bano's 'God and I' (Main aur Mera Khuda) give us a spectrum of genre, writing styles and thematic concerns. While the first two clearly tell of a world built on gender inequality, the last is a meditative piece of prose-poetry that swerves away, though briefly, from the general tone of the volume. It is a compelling piece of writing, and Akhtar shows critical acumen and an appetite for risk by choosing this rather than something from Jeelani Bano's considerable, and well-known, realist oeuvre.

It is likely that serious readers of Urdu prose will have read or at least heard of Zeenath Sajida, as an established literary historian and critic, and Bano, an internationally acclaimed and much-translated writer. Najma Nikhat's name, however, has languished in relative obscurity. And so it is gratifying that Akhtar's extensively researched and sensitively written chapter on her remarkable life and writing is the highlight of this book. As the book tells us, Nikhat was an avowed Communist, and her small but significant body of work explored the varied themes of modern marriage, urban alienation and rural revolt, in addition to her 'best' stories, that is, 'of the deodis' or mansions that remain in the literature and the popular imagination, the most potent symbols of Hyderabad's dissolute aristocracy (p. 214). Wajeda Tabassum's work would have complemented this wonderfully, and Akhtar is right to lament the tangle of copyright permissions that prevented its inclusion.

The documentary impulse of the book finds expression in the inclusion of rare black and white photographs of each author and of memorable public events in their careers. Regrettably, this impulse does not serve the demands of literary *interpretation* as well. In her 'Introduction', Akhtar eloquently discusses the politics of translation and her own process of rendering Urdu into English. However, the allusive richness of the originals, captured nicely in the translation, is wrung dry in the interpretation. The urge to not miss out on explicating a single image or theme may serve a pedagogic purpose in a beginners' classroom but threatens to overwhelm the reader who would like more from the writer

than the interpreter. In her least successful effort—Jeelani Bano's 'God and I'—Akhtar confesses to feeling that interpretation does 'violence' to this quasi-mystical piece of writing (p. 286). But this also gestures towards a general danger while introducing writers from a minor literary tradition (in the Deleuzian sense) to readers belonging to a dominant one and is possibly part of the anxiety that attends the project of recovery. It results in what one can only call over-explanation. Not only is each piece of writing mined for feminist themes, other work by the writer is summarised and its political importance spelled out in thoroughgoing detail. More translations with crisper interpretive essays would have made for a richer reading experience. Another helpful critical move would have been to flesh out the connections between these writers, and their relationship to their contemporaries. Connections are mentioned, but fail to become part of the fabric of the book, leading to each writer standing somewhat aloof from the other, brought together more or less by the will of the author.

As a literary critic and teacher Zeenath Sajida, for instance, was deeply invested in researching the literary traditions of the Deccan, as well as in canon-building. *Hyderabad ke Urdu Adeeb: Intekhab-e-Nasr, 1900–1958* ('The Urdu Writers of Hyderabad: A Selection of Prose'), the volume she edited and that remains to this day the only collection of its kind, is mentioned (p. 114) but could have been allowed to play a larger role in the analysis. It was first published in 1958, and in it Sajida chose to include a young Jeelani Bano's short story 'Mom ki Maryam' ('The Wax Mary', briefly discussed in *Bibi's Room*, p. 291), one of only three women to feature in the volume, the other two being her mentor Jahanbano Naqvi and Sajida herself. Here, incidentally, is also to be found a warm introduction to an Osmania University legend, jokingly referred to as 'a man called Mir Hasan' in Sajida's justly famous tribute to the poet Makhdoom Mohiuddin, discussed at length by Akhtar ('You Scratch my Back', pp. 144–149). No commentary can do justice to the combination of exuberant irreverence and depths of regard contained in this masterpiece of comic writing. The best parts of Akhtar's commentary are the direct translations, on the strength of which we may hope that a more complete translation into English is imminent—of this and other work featured in the book. Interpretive excesses notwithstanding, then, *Bibi's Room* should be celebrated as the beginning of serious scholarship in English on the work of Urdu women writers from Hyderabad.

Note

1. Some of these find mention in the Introduction, such as C.M. Naim's recent translation *A Most Noble Life: the Biography of Ashrafunnissa Begum* (2022) and Rakhshanda Jalil's book on Rashid Jahan, *A Rebel and Her Cause* (2014).

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