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## Mapping the Trajectory of Indian Muslim Women's Life Writings: An Autoethnographical Approach

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18246940>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 26-12-2025

**Published:** 10-01-2026

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**Keywords:**

*Autoethnography, Indian Muslim Women, Purdah, Islamic Feminism, Cultural Memory, Life-Writing, Resistance, Postcolonial Identity, Gendered Space, Hybridity*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of gender, religion, culture, and politics in Indian Muslim women's life-writing through an autoethnographic lens. Basing its analysis on seminal and recent works — such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*, Rasheed Jahan's Urdu short stories, Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*, and some memoirs from conflict areas like Kashmir — the paper analyzes how Indian Muslim women represent lived experiences characterized by purdah, marginalization, and resistance. Employing a triple framework of Islamic feminism, postcolonial thought, and autoethnography, this research places these works in more than personal biography — they are spaces of embodied political analysis and cultural memory. The essay contends that autoethnographic readings of these accounts challenge monolithic representations of Muslim identity and generate counter-discursive sites that privilege voice, agency, and historical self-knowledge.

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### 1. Introduction

Indian Muslim women's life-writing is in a liminal position — historically marginalized but deeply subversive in its construction of self, society, and resistance. Operating within intersecting systems of patriarchy, colonialism, religious orthodoxy, and communal politics, these women have employed writing as a tool of cultural negotiation and survival. Their voices, long silenced by both secular and religious nationalist narratives, are now being reinterpreted through the prism of self-writing and



autoethnography.

This essay examines these stories not as discrete testimonies but as refractions, fractured, complex mirrors of individual and collective selves under historical and socio-political duress. Grounded in the autoethnographic approach, this research aims to map how Indian Muslim women employ life-writing to claim visibility, subvert gendered boundaries, and reconfigure the self in oppressive systems like purdah, the home zenana, and the cultural ideal of tahzeeb (etiquette/culture).

## 2. Literature Review

There has been increased scholarship on Indian Muslim women's writing over the past two decades, but much still needs to be done, especially with regard to their autobiographical and autoethnographic voices. Reformist works of the early period like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) have been identified as feminist utopian visions that opposed both patriarchy and colonial modernity. Rokeya's work was a turning point towards education and self-assertion in Islamic discourse.

Rasheed Jahan, the first of the Progressive Writers' Movement writers, introduced the subjectivity of the lives of Muslim women in her clinical and fearless short stories. Her works, like *Behind the Veil*, challenged the bodily and psychic enclosure by tradition and family.

Qurratulain Hyder, through *River of Fire* (1959), presented an expansive historical panorama that refused to compartmentalize gender from politics. She positioned the Muslim woman as a spectator to and partaker of cultural and political agitations from ancient India to post-Partition trauma.

Recent literature, including memoirs by Muslim women from Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam — deals with issues of surveillance, communal violence, state marginalization, and cultural memory. Scholars like Rakhshanda Jalil and Syeda Hameed have made efforts to document these voices, but academic interest in them through an autoethnographic lens is scarce.

## 3. Methodology: Autoethnography as Framework

This essay utilizes autoethnography not just as a methodology but as an epistemological position. Termed and forged by researchers like Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, autoethnography makes it possible for an embodied, reflective analysis in which personal story overlaps with cultural critique.

Autoethnographic notions are applied in two ways in the study:

1. Textual Autoethnography: In which the subject-authors themselves narrate their experiences in



culturally embedded ways.

2. Analytical Autoethnography: In which the researcher is critically and reflexively working with these stories, recognizing her own positionality as a woman and academic working with culturally proximate narratives.

This double vision enables a nuanced reading that neither romanticizes nor objectifies the Muslim female subject, but instead recognizes her story as layered, situated, and often resisting simplistic binaries.

#### **4. Thematic Analysis**

##### **4.1. Purdah as Metaphor and Materiality**

Purdah, far from being the straightforward symbol of oppression that it is usually read as, is a multifaceted signifier in these texts. In Sultana's Dream, purdah is turned on its head, men are veiled, women participate in public life, laying bare the performativity of gender. In Jahan's fiction, purdah is both spatial and psychological, a veil not only of cloth but of fear and silencing.

In Kashmiri memoirs, purdah is reimagined in the eyes of the military and the camera — veiling is not only modesty, but also protection from surveillance, sexual violence, and erasure of identity.

##### **4.2. Tahzeeb and the Politics of Speech**

Indian Muslim tahzeeb, or manner, places limitations on when and how women have a voice. Life-writings resist silencing. Hyder's female protagonists are powerful speakers, their words laced with irony and political consciousness. Memoirists describe how silencing was established through decorous expectations, and how writing acted as a refusal of inherited courtesy that required assent.

##### **4.3. Zenana and Mardana: Spatial Politics**

The separation of home into mardana (men's areas) and zenana (women's areas) is a repeated spatial metaphor. In Jahan's fiction, the zenana is cramped and sexually oppressive. Hyder subverts this by locating her female heroes in transgressive sites — universities, political meetings, Partition trains.

##### **4.4. Memory, History, and Resistance**

Muslim women's memoirs usually contradict mainstream narratives of history. They are not simply passive victims of Partition or communalism but alternative historians. Hyder denounces both nationalist and communalist simplifications. The modern-day memoirs from Northeast India and Kashmir document



histories that the state doesn't want to archive — disappearances, curfews, riots, and dislocations.

## 5. Discussion

Autoethnographic reading of these works shows how Indian Muslim women subvert being reduced to tropes — neither idealized as victims nor tokenized as survivors. Their life-writing is a practice of agency, not through revolution but through the quiet insurrection of storytelling. Their writings are "lived epistemologies", where the mundane is encoded with political resistance.

What emerges is not a unified “Muslim woman’s experience,” but a polyphony of voices that disrupt static identity categories. By writing themselves into history, these women alter both the literary canon and the cultural archive.

## 6. Conclusion

The confluence of purdah and politics in Indian Muslim women's life-writings offers a distinct literary space — a space of reflection, resistance, and redefinition. Reading these narratives autoethnographically, we realize them as not only personal but fundamentally political, continually negotiating between silence and speech, visibility and erasure.

In amplifying these voices, this study demands a remade feminist and postcolonial critique that is culturally informed and ethically attuned. The Indian Muslim woman, long described, is now describing herself — no longer from the periphery, but from within the center of her own past.

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