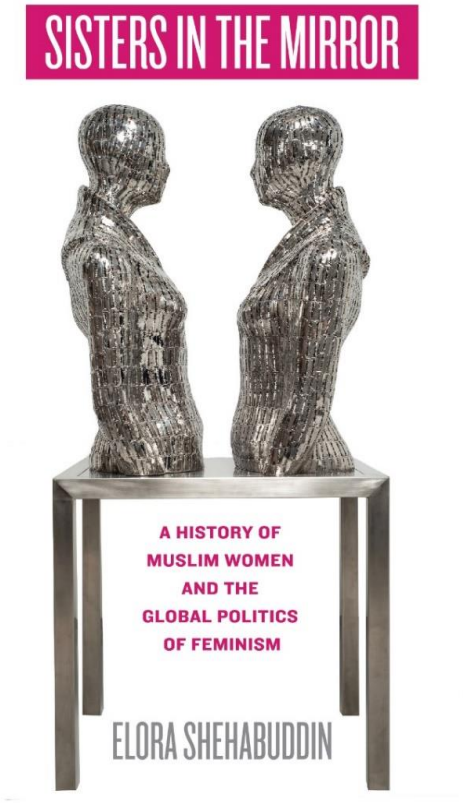
Elora Shehabuddin. 2022. *Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 398 pp. ISBN: 9789845063944.



Elora Shehabuddin's *Sisters in the Mirror,* first published by the University of California Press in 2021, begins by evoking Aretha Franklin's and Annie Lennox's 1985 duet "Sisters are Doing it for Themselves." It was a groundbreaking song in its time, showcasing women of different cultures and ethnicities on its accompanying video. Shehabuddin uses it nearly four decades later to pose a crucial question regarding modern day feminism: As many in the West generally regard "Muslim women as polar opposites of Western women" (2), can sisterhood exist between the two? Probing into the histories of Muslim women of the East, mostly, those of South Asia, Shehabuddin examines the social, political, and economic situations of Muslim women from the sixteenth century onwards. Her lens is that of a historian but, in contrast to most other books written on this topic, she reverses the Western gaze. On the one hand, she

shows how Muslim women were used by the West to shape their own social standards; on the other, she records how generations of these same women were also engaged in their own battles to claim rights. A most significant aspect of this book is that it allows the Western audience to see themselves through the lens of the East.

As I held the book in my hands, my eyes were riveted on the words "sisters" and "mirror." Having grown up with a postcolonial identity, it is impossible for me to ignore the many connotations of the "mirror." And my academic training warns me of the complexities of sisterhood with all its conflicting ideas. A South Asian woman myself, reading Shehabuddin's groundbreaking book is like reassessing and reimagining my identity and space. While a number of other books on Muslim women have come out in the recent past, *Sisters in the Mirror* brings about a holistic view of the situation of Muslim women in South Asia with an emphasis on Bengali Muslim women. As the author points out, *Sisters in the Mirror* is a feminist story about the "changing global and local power disparities—between Europeans and Bengalis; between Brahmos, Hindus, and Muslims within Bengal; between feminists of the Global North and South; and between Western and Muslim Feminists" (9). The historical insights and transnational dialogues brought in through memoirs, travel narratives, letters, and newspaper articles make this text a fascinating read, but for the same reason, it is not a book one can devour in one sitting. It constitutes a rich source of ideas about issues relating to Muslim women as well as how they are crafted in Western materials. The information it provides is both useful and comprehensive, and there is much to ponder and reflect upon in this well-written account. I for one went back and forth to read and re-read different sections and felt illuminated to have figured out the connections between different parts of the work.

The chapter that caught my attention the most is titled "Soulless Seraglios in the Grievances of Englishwomen." "Serraglio" is an Italian term meaning "place of confinement" (35), but somehow it became confused with "serai," a Turkish word for palace and, for many centuries now, "seraglio" has come to refer to Muslim women confined in the inner quarters. Shehabuddin shows how early English feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) used images of depraved Muslim men and their harems to prove their points regarding the oppression of Western women and urged men not to become like the cruel Turks. Holding a mirror before that part of Western feminist history, Shehabuddin identifies a number of problems. First, Britain, even while using Western women as a yardstick of supremacy, was nonetheless reluctant to allow them any political, social, and legal rights. Second, many Anglo-American feminist leaders were unable to see the feminine space beyond the veils of the harem. Third, European men and women alike considered Muslim women to be soulless and bound in servitude, and the harem as a place of sexual pleasure for Muslim men.

And yet, fourth, some Western women, like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762). who were able to actually visit elite female quarters, strongly contradicted the prevalent Western notions of the harem and even longed for such a safe space for women in their own society. It is interesting to note that a contemporary visitor, Mirza Abu Taleb Khan (1752–1806) of Lucknow and Calcutta, found his way to England and made comparative observations on Muslim women and those of the West. He noted that freedom for Western women meant freedom of movement, while their Muslim counterparts in India enjoyed power over property and children.

The chapter "Gospel, Adventure, and Introspection in an Expanding Empire" expands on the previous chapter and provides an elaborate account of English women who journeyed to the East with their husbands. Many of them ventured to enter the harem which Western men could only imagine and fantasise about. Their accounts are noteworthy in many ways. While they thought of helping their Eastern sisters, in most cases, typical condescension crept in from time to time. Annette Akroyd Beveridge (1842–1929), for example, evoked the idea of a shared sisterhood, but she also pointed out the differences between "civilized" and "enslaved" women (112). There are accounts that made more relatable comparisons when writing about the predicaments of English and Indian women. Fanny Parkes' reference to English women as the "white slaves of England" (92) is interesting, as the term is used by an English woman to describe the problems faced by women of her own country. Another notable point comes from the observations of Turkish and Indian Muslim women on the stiff nature of corsets worn by English ladies. The obvious underlying question here is: How can Western women be considered free if they cannot even dress themselves without help? And the other question that comes to mind is how women capable of posing such questions can be considered soulless.

In a particularly gripping chapter entitled "Writing Feminism, Writing Freedom," Shehabuddin covers stories of Bengali women writers such as Bibi Taherannesa[1] to Faizunnesa Chaudhurai (1834–1903), Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), and her much older sister Karimunnesa Khanam (1825–1926), Masuda Khatun (1885–1926), Razia Khatun Chaudhurani (1907–34), and later Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908–1964) and Sufia Kamal (1911–1999). It would not be at all incorrect to say that these pages summarise the history of enlightenment for Muslim women through education. The process was extremely difficult to say the least, because conservative Muslims stood against modern education introduced by the British. Shehabuddin goes into extensive detail bringing out the battles Rokeya and others of her generation fought to provide the basic education for the Muslim women of Bengal. While writing about the history of women's education, Shehabuddin also weaves in the political histories

[1] A variant spelling of Taherunnesa.

in the background—the 1905 partition and how it was revoked in 1911 and its effects on the women of Bengal.

An important aspect of *Sisters in the Mirror* is that it takes note of the role of newspapers that brought out writings by women. *Bamabodhini Patrika* launched in August 1863 published an article by Taherunnesa in 1865 where the writer claimed education as "that priceless jewel" (129). Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* was first published in *Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1905. Periodicals such as *Mussulman*, *Bulbul*, *Nabanoor,* and *Saogat* are cited as some of the outlets where early Muslim women writers saw their works in print.

While discussing women issues in post-independence Bangladesh, Taslima Nasreen[2] (1962–) is one name that is difficult to avoid. Her stance and reception by the Western media naturally induced Shehabuddin to examine her position in the context of Bangladesh. Early in her career, Nasreen had drawn attention by speaking out about sexual harassment. Many young women identified with her experiences and she became a household name. But her later stance against Islam attracted unwarranted attention and death threats. In Chapter 8 of her book, Shehabuddin discusses Meredith Tax (1942–2022), the US journalist who helped Nasreen publish her op-ed titled "Sentenced to Death" in *The New York Times*. Tax later recalled that many reporters wanted to use Nasreen's story as "a stick to beat Islam" (253). It is unfortunate that things turned that way, and ultimately Nasreen's approach did not help women's causes in Bangladesh.

The last point on which I want to focus is an ongoing and difficult topic for Bangladesh, the rape victims of the 1971 liberation war, the Birangonas (war heroines). An April 3, 2023 article by Thaslima Begum in *The Guardian* addresses women's recent testimony to the atrocious incidents from over fifty years ago. While the fact of mass rape has long been known, not many women had shared their gruesome experiences. Only a handful of books like *Ami Birangona Bolchhi* (A war heroine, I speak, 1994), *Rising from the Ashes* (2001), and *The Spectral Wound* (2015) have *documented* the suffering of Bangladesh's 1971 rape victims. As Shehabuddin aptly points out, it is only in the recent past, along with the horrific tales of Bosnia and other war-ravaged countries, that the stories of Bangladeshi women in 1971 are being examined in a new light. Previously, instead of actually helping the victims integrate in society, the newly independent country had only alienated them by naming them *birangonas*, or war heroines. It is Bangladeshi feminist groups that have pointed this out, demanding that the rapes be recognised as "war crimes" rather than "loss of honour."

The book jacket of *Sisters in the Mirror* tells how the "Muslim world is often portrayed as the last and the most difficult frontier of global feminism" and how Elora Shehabuddin engages in presenting a "unique and engaging history of

[2] Also spelled Nasrin.

feminism as a story of colonial and postcolonial interaction between Western and Muslim societies." The acknowledgments and the substantial works cited list show the amount of effort that went behind this much needed and valuable work. I highly recommend this book to all readers who want a nonlinear account of the relationship between the women of the East and the West.

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