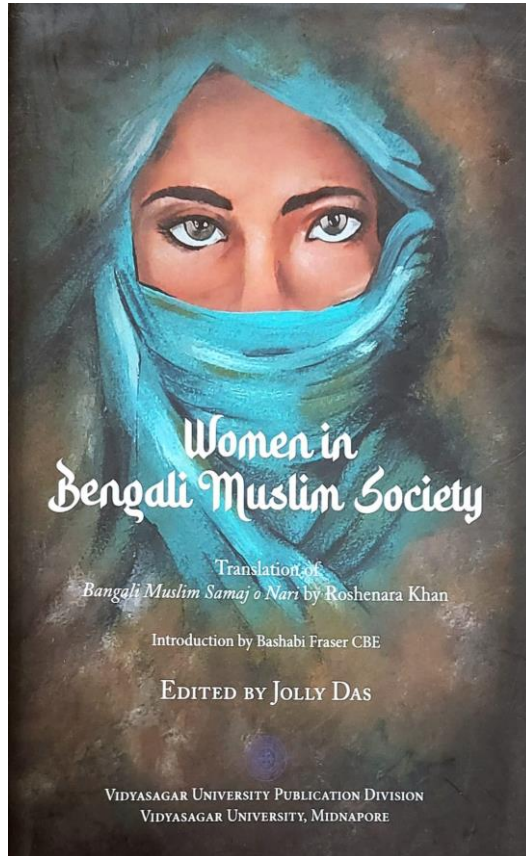


Roshenara Khan. *Women in Bengali Muslim Society*, translation of *Bangali Muslim Samaj O Nari*. Edited by Jolly Das. Midnapore: Vidyasagar University Publication Division, 2024, 200 pp. ISBN – 978-81-934766-9-7.



In *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon assert that “disadvantage, discrimination, and disempowerment are experienced at specific and particular intersections of class, caste, gender, and community” (qtd. in Sarkar 198). They further argue that any “discussion of Muslim women must speak, to two simultaneous projects: a critique of cultural essentialism/reductionism . . . and the formulation of historically and socially grounded concerns and strategies” (qtd. in Sarkar 198-199). *Women in Bengali Muslim Society*, a translation of *Bangali Muslim Samaj O Nari* by Roshenara Khan (1957 –), appears to follow a similar trajectory, addressing the intersectional discrimination against Muslim women in Bengal. Roshenara Khan is a distinguished writer and activist who has received numerous prestigious awards, including the Vidyasagar Award, for significant contributions to

raising awareness on issues affecting Bengali Muslim women. The original work in the vernacular is a compilation of her earlier writings— anecdotes, essays, and letters. These were published in Bengali dailies and magazines, locating Muslim women within the cultural politics of Bengal. Edited by Jolly Das, this English translation broadens its access to a global readership. It also bridges the gap between academic and activist pursuits. The book's overall design is appealing. It includes ten essays by Khan, accompanied by a preface ("A Few Words"), a personal anecdote ("The Path was not Strewn with Blossoms"), and a concluding piece ("Words Thereafter..."). A brief note from the editor, Jolly Das, and a scholarly introduction by Bashabi Fraser CBE enhance the book's appeal.

Khan's writing style is refreshingly candid, a quality that has been preserved in the translated volume. The book explores diverse discursive practices that stereotype Muslim women or reduce them to "just one of the facets of their multifaceted identities" (Petrova 5). The essays in this book address issues such as child marriage, sex trafficking, polygamy among Muslim men, the custom of purdah, dowry, and triple talaq. However, in discussing such issues, Khan does not engage in deeper analysis of relevant Islamic rulings in the light of modern *ijtihad* (independent jurisprudential reasoning) as opposed to *taqlid* (indiscriminate imitation or replication of the views of past scholars). The book also demonstrates how a Bengali Muslim woman simultaneously navigates multiple identities – an Indian, a Bengali, a Muslim, and a woman. Khan does not hesitate to denounce individuals, political parties, or religious groups she holds responsible for the deplorable condition of Muslim women. Rather than solely blaming extremists and politicians, she emphasises the complicity of educated Muslims in perpetuating the crisis.

Poverty and a lack of awareness lead to early marriage and adolescent pregnancies among Muslim girls, shattering their dreams of education and career. Khan calls this an "unnatural death" in the essay titled "Child Marriage is Still Sanctioned in Muslim Society" (53). In another essay called "Trafficking in Women and Girls," Khan feels that trafficking similarly deals a severe blow to girls and women of vulnerable and illiterate Muslim families in villages of Bengal. They are kidnapped or deceived through false offers of lucrative jobs or marriage, and are subsequently taken to distant places in the country or abroad by sex traffickers. Many such cases are discussed in this book. Khan argues that both early marriage and sex trafficking are fallouts of failed government policies at the state and central levels. In the essay "Barriers to Women's Education," Khan emphasises the state's role as central in improving educational opportunities for Muslim girls, which may promote their social and economic advancement. This book offers a timely critique of the current framework of government policies, which appear to be designed primarily to attract either Hindu or Muslim votes while neglecting the issue of inequality. Khan's grim observations on child marriage and sex trafficking underscore the precarious situation of these unfortunate young girls.

Six essays in this book: “Child Marriage is Still Sanctioned in Muslim Society,” “Muslim Men’s Right to Polygamy,” “The Tradition of Dowry and Mahr in Muslim Marriages,” “The Tale of Teen Talaq,” “Barriers to Women’s Education,” and “Relevance of Uniform Civil Code” address issues related to the rights of Muslim women as citizen-subjects. Khan also addresses topics like gender, community, and the cultural politics that produce ‘Muslim-ness’ in contemporary Bengal. A key feature of this book is Khan’s argument that Bengali Muslims, primarily converts, possess an inherent cultural connection to Bengali Hindus. Khan meticulously explores Bengali household rituals and catalogues personal items such as clothing, cosmetics, and toiletries in the following essays titled “The Marital and Other Social Rituals of Bengali Muslims,” “Life and Livelihood of Muslim Women,” and “The Attire of Bengali Muslim Women.” In doing so, she carefully crafts an image of the Bengali Muslim woman she identifies with. Khan asserts that “possibly in the whole world, it is the Bengali Muslim women who prioritise their cultural identity over their religious identity, which is evident in everything including cuisine, attire, customs and behavior, and toilette” (128). This strategically rediscovers an old, indigenous cultural identity. The saree becomes a symbol of pride for Bengali Muslim women; a bindi on the forehead serves as a distinct mark of cultural identity. However, Khan’s proposition in this regard, as in some other contexts, is susceptible to the charge of overgeneralisation.

Khan’s ready wit and candid critiques are preserved in the English translation. However, as a collaborative effort, this book could have ensured consistency in the quality of translation and avoided certain typographical errors. Translations of parts of the two essays, “Trafficking in Women and Girls” and “Barriers to Women’s Education,” are weak. Section 125 of the CRPC has been incorrectly referred to as “section 125 of the Indian Penal Code” on pages 134 and 185, and Article 15 of the Indian Constitution has been misprinted as “Article 125” on page 186, leading to unnecessary confusion. Uniformity of spelling has not always been maintained in this book. The spelling of ‘talaq’ appears as ‘talak’ on page 41 of this book, and ‘attar’ appears as ‘atar’ on page 98.

Khan writes what she observes, and for her, religion is what she performs. Her approach is direct and untainted by sophistication, yet it carries risks of oversimplification. This book, on the whole, is a unique endeavour by a Bengali Muslim middle-class housewife who turns to writing as a form of protest and gradually becomes engaged in human rights activism. It is, in part, a memoir that recounts the story of a strong-willed, self-educated daughter-in-law who connects with her self-effacing, illiterate mother-in-law through their shared experiences of sorrow. This bond compels Khan to write about their lives and the lives of others like them. In this work, she addresses the issues of invisibility and exclusion of Bengali Muslim women, largely overlooked by the ‘secular’ mainstream. In the face of increasing Islamophobia and religious extremism, she redefines the distinct

cultural identity of Bengali Muslim women. This book is a seminal work and a significant contribution to the study of Bengali Muslim women's condition.

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