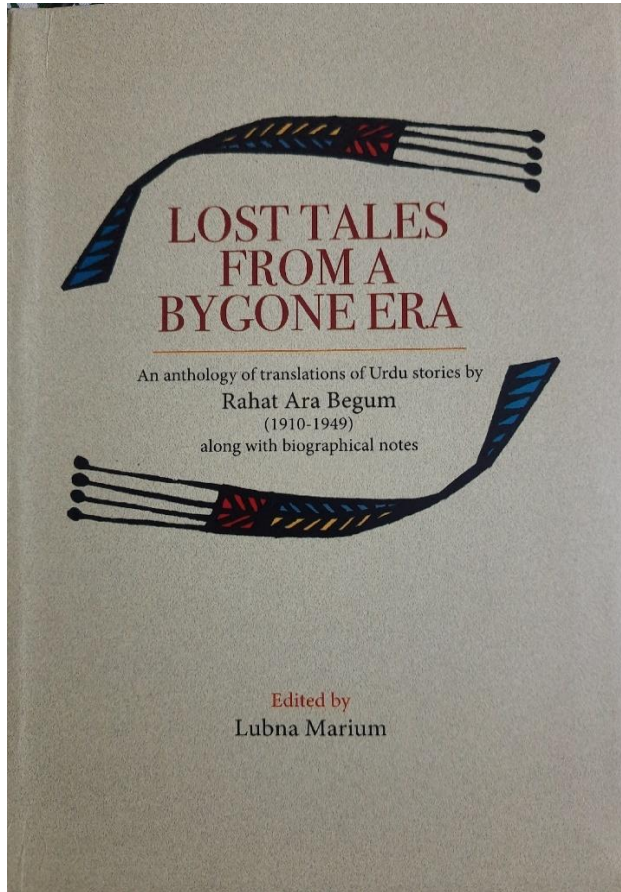


Rahat Ara Begum. 2025. *Lost Tales from a Bygone Era*. Ed. Lubna Marium. Dhaka: Nympha Publications, 285 pp. ISBN: 978-984-99006-3-4



Elaine Showalter once asked whether feminist criticism is “the women’s space within modern criticism, the ‘maternal subtext’ of patriarchal theory, the repository for the questions of literary value, social change, and personal experience that modern criticism has tried to banish or repress” (Showalter 30). While reading Rahat Ara Begum’s stories from the 1930s, one may eventually end up asking whether she was producing a “maternal subtext” of whatever contemporary patriarchy manifested itself in, i.e., the various social expectations, values, material interests, and spiritual necessities that women of her time were judged upon. The anthology of translations of Urdu stories titled *Lost Tales from a Bygone Era*, mainly focusing on the woman question that is representative of,

and also goes beyond the limits of Begum's time, is truly a display of 'God's plenty' because of the manifold nature of the tales. These stories would help a reader look back at South Asian women's literary history in a new light.

Nine stories in the book are narratives of nine protagonists, both men and women, from different socio-economic strata. Time and space are suggestive of pre-Partition India, mainly the Muslim inhabited areas. Even though one hardly finds names of prominent cities that the author herself was familiar with, the readers can intuit that the stories are products of an urban Muslim upper-middle class mind. As a young upper-class woman with the basic identity of a housewife and mother, Rahat Ara's creative genius was not time warped, nor does she gloss over other social classes or people outside of her urban circle. Her Urdu stories often cover the lives of characters from the Bengali speaking community. So, she traverses the multilingual and multicultural Indian subcontinent with immaculate ease. Some stories reflect on the emphasized femininity, while others have sparks of a budding Muslim feminism of the kind Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain represented.

Two stories in the book specially show how Rahat Ara perceived poverty and women's vulnerability, and that too of a class that was distant from her own. Despite living in the affluence of Muslim aristocracy in India, Rahat Ara understood how every woman's life was not full of lucky charms, and "Ek Bhikaran Ki Kahani" ("Beggar Woman's Tale") reflects her serious thoughts on how economic settlement was needed for women to continue a modest life in the absence of a male earning member. "Insaaf?" ("Justice?") is another story that poignantly narrates the sufferings of a young widow who is trapped by people's deception and selfishness. Rahat Ara touches on women's desire and sexuality vis-à-vis the ancient taboos regarding widow remarriage, and the cruelty of a conservative social system. As such, the author is not an aggressive dissenter; she is rather a polite advocate of social change.

Colonial India witnessed the abolition of 'sati' and initiation of the widow remarriage act that the author was aware of, and she presents the necessity of social action against injustices perpetrated upon helpless women living outside the pale of privileged sections. Upper class urban educated women were equally vulnerable, as they lived in the rural periphery. Rahat Ara shows women's issues existing within the powerful social circumference, in which women found themselves trapped in the very idea of freedom.

The story "Azadi" ("Freedom") is exemplary of her quiet observation of a changing social class, while she remains steadfast in her own idea of women's freedom. In the story she takes up purdah as it was in vogue around the 1920s and 1930s to talk about the custom of seclusion, especially among the Muslims.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* was already published in 1905, which critiqued patriarchy in the form of science fiction. Rokeya also published her other strong feminist pieces *Padmarag* (1924) and her strong critique of extreme forms of purdah, *Abarodhbasini* (1931). Rahat Ara presents her thoughts rather indirectly. The story "Azadi" narrates a strong-willed upper-middle class Muslim woman's efforts to overcome the hurdles on her way to intellectual progress, and shows how she is able to convince her husband of her good intentions through perseverance and strength of character. The protagonist of the story writes for journals and magazines, and despite living in the centre of an upper middle class educated social circle, she falls into a trap set by an acquaintance. She was enticed to have a long drive with her husband's male friend, and comes back after days of staying away from home. Sita's abduction by Ravana in the *Ramayana* or disrobing of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* are glaring examples of how deeply rooted the concepts of 'respect' and women's 'chastity' are in Indian culture, and what far reaching effects these can have if a woman's chastity is questioned.

Rahat Ara, quite idealistic and probably a bit too romantic in her vision, shows how the woman is accepted by her husband in love and faith. Their reunion in tears and embraces is perhaps an expression of the author's hope against hope that women will be redeemed of an unkind and unjust society someday. However, the protagonist never surrenders to the conservatism of society, and upholds her ideal of keeping spiritual and moral strength instead of adhering to a custom. Neither emasculation (demanding a decrease in masculinity) nor immasculation (behaving in the masculine way) is Rahat Ara's forte; she practices a completely different kind of feminism that asks women to look at their own plight with a clinical approach.

Along with the stories, the book includes a few analyses of those, mostly by Rahat Ara Begum's successors, providing interesting insights into the following generation. For example, Tazkiah Faizaan Baaquie, a great granddaughter, writes that the author "ensures no crossover between Hindu and Muslim characters, signalling the deep seeds of partition of India at that time" (242), which is interesting. Indeed, the conflict narratives over inter-communal love and 'love jihad' are but products of post-Partition imagination triggered by the experience of communal violence and cruelty. Rahat Ara's was rather a world of morality, justice, love, resistance, and surrender to reality that signalled the transition of a traditionally set society. Historically, her work matters as a representation of the rich heritage of writings by Muslim women in the global south that are not curated. In terms of gender politics, these fictional accounts are truly her(stories) vis-à-vis the malecentric history that we come across in various narratives of South Asian feminism.

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