

LIVES IN FRAGMENTS: NARRATING RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY IN LIFE-WRITINGS OF INDIAN MUSLIM WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The life-writings of Indian Muslim women writers reflect nuanced negotiations of identity, resistance, and memory within a deeply gendered and communally charged socio-political landscape. This chapter examines autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works by writers such as Ismat Chughtai (Kaghazi Hai Pairahan) and Attia Hosain (Sunlight on a Broken Column), who craft narratives that intertwine the personal with the political amid the backdrop of colonial decline, nationalist movements, and Partition. Their writings illuminate how gender, religion, and class intersect to shape the inner and outer lives of Muslim women, revealing acts of subtle defiance against patriarchal and colonial structures. Expanding the scope to contemporary regional literature, the chapter engages with Heart Lamp: Selected Stories by Banu Mushtaq, originally written in Kannada and translated into English by Deepa Bhasthi. Published in 2024 and winner of the International Booker Prize in 2025, this collection offers a vital counterpoint to earlier life-writings by fictionalising everyday experiences of Muslim women in southern India. Mushtaq's stories - spanning over three decades - offer a grounded, intimate view into lives marked by systemic gender inequality, yet resilient in the face of oppression. The chapter also draws connections with memoirs such as Qurratulain Hyder's Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai and contemporary interventions like Sabyn Javeri's essays, to trace a literary continuum that resists marginalisation and asserts voice. Through a comparative analysis, this chapter positions these life-writings within the broader framework of postcolonial feminist theory, foregrounding how Indian Muslim women use literature as a space for reclaiming agency and narrating survival.

Keywords: Indian Muslim women writers, life-writing, Partition literature, Ismat Chughtai, Banu Mushtaq, Heart Lamp, postcolonial feminism, gender and identity, Kannada literature, resistance narratives

INTRODUCTION

In the vast and multifaceted corpus of Indian literature, the voices of Muslim women have often remained on the margins - either omitted entirely or overshadowed by dominant narratives that fail to account for their complex socio-political realities. Life-writing, as a literary form, allows for the confluence of the personal and the political, offering a vital medium through which Indian Muslim women articulate their fragmented selves, negotiate agency, and resist layered structures of oppression. The autobiographical mode enables an interrogation of subjectivity that is continually shaped by intersections of gender, religion, class, and historical displacement, particularly in a nation-state marked by colonial legacies and communal politics.

THIS IS A LIMITED PREVIEW OF THE CHAPTER.

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