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"Main bhī muṉh meṉ zubān rakhti hūṉ": Feminist Identity, Confession, Consciousness-Raising, and Urdu Autobiography: A Study of *Dagar Se Haṭ Kar* (1996) by Saeeda Bano (1920-2001)

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Abstract. My paper aims to study Saeeda Bano's autobiography *Ḍagar Se Haṭ Kar* (1996) as a candid feminist autobiography. While articulating her unconventional story, the author becomes the voice of the doubly marginalized Muslim women. It examines how while documenting the socio-political milieu and disenfranchised history, the author indulges in consciousness-raising and emphasizes the relevance of female education, economic independence, and a self-reliant female identity. The paper directs our attention to the confessional nature of the autobiography, which foregrounds the most personal and intimate details of the author's life and initiates the process of critical self-understanding and self-validation. It intends to analyze the autobiography as a revolutionary text that resists normative gender roles and urges women to create their own identity and space to exercise their freedom to live on their own terms. The paper posits how the contributions of innumerable women like Begum Sultan Jahan paved the path of independence for the author. It aims to investigate how the book critiques deep-seated sexism and charts the author's journey from the usual to the unusual.

Keywords. Autobiography, Saeeda Bano, feminist, identity, confession, consciousness-raising, zanana

Women writers pioneered and championed the genre of Urdu autobiography. The first of this kind, *Bīṭī Kaḥānī* (1886), was penned by a woman called Shehar Bano Begum. The genre witnessed a plethora of remarkable autobiographies like *Tuzk-i Sultānī* (1910) by Nawab Sultan Jahan

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Begum, *Inquilāb Zindābād* (1985) by Manaorama Deewan, *Äzādi ki Cẖāo̱n Mai̱n* (1980) by Anees Kidwai, *Bīṭe Lamẖe: Yādo̱n ke Charāgh* (1998) by Zakiya Sultana Nayar, *Bīṭe Lamẖe Bīṭī Yādei̱n* (2000) by Hamida Bano, *Jannat Se Nikli Ḥui Ḥawā* (1998) by Syeda Nafis Bano Shama, *Jo Raḥi So Bekhabari Raḥi* (1996) by Ada Jafarey, *Kāghazi Ḥai Pairaḥan* (1992) by Ismat Chughtai, *Main Kaun Ḥun* (2014) by Jilani Bano, *Mendā Sāin* by Tahmina Durrani, *Mere Log Zindä Raḥenge* (1982) by Leila Khaled, *Nairangi-ʿe Bakht* (1942) by Vazeer Sultan Begum Jalandhari, *Nawā-e- Zindagi* (2012) by Sajida Zaidi, *Rasīdī Ṭicket* by Amrita Pritam, *Shīrīn Katḥa* (2016) by Mumtaz Shireen, *Shorish-e Daurā̱n* (1995) by Hamida Salim, *Silsila-e-Roz-o shab* (1984)- Saleha Abid Husain, *Yād ki Rahguzar* (2006) by Shaukat Kaifi and *Zindagi kī Yādei̱n, Riyāsat-e Rāmpur ka Nawābi Daur* (2003), by Jahanara Habibullah. Nevertheless, women's autobiographical writing was seldom taken seriously as a focus of study before the seventies. It was not considered appropriately complex for academic dissertations, criticism, or the literary canon. Scholarly and popular historians regarded "it as best a mine of biographical information and salty citations" (Sidonie and Watson 4). With time, the status of women's autobiographies changed dramatically. It is now "a privileged site for thinking about issues of writing at the intersection of feminist, post-colonial and post-modern critical theories. The texts of women's autobiography have been crucial for revising our concepts of women's life issues- growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle" (Sidonie and Watson 5). The rise in popularity of autobiography can be ascribed to various reasons. The socio-politico-historical upheavals of the twentieth century had created a suitable environment for women's writing to proliferate. Society was amenable to women's viewpoints and female narratives. Women's autobiography is a marginal discourse that syncs suitably with the marginalized female voice. It is a way of making visible formerly invisible subjects. It is a literal site of cultural and political representation of female subjectivity.

Shabana Saleem, in *Urdu Mein Khwātīn kī Khud- Navishṭ: Sawāneh Umariyā̱n*, discusses the Urdu autobiography elaborately and posits that it is exquisitely marked by tremendous self-consciousness because the writer transcribes her experiences, and while doing so, pauses to ponder over the lessons that were learned, and consider over where deviations took place. While doing so, the writer rises above her life and thinks from a broader perspective. She adds that writing an autobiography requires self-reliance and courage. The writer should be a truth-teller with the courage to speak fearlessly. It also requires the audacity to expose oneself to the world and scrutinize and accept one's merits and demerits without feeling ashamed or stripped. She expounds that a writer's personality defines an autobiography. If the personality is political, then the autobiography will also be political. Another quality required of a compelling autobiography is criticism. An autobiography critically examines the socio-political milieu and emerges as a vivid cultural, social, and historical document.

An outstanding autobiography that fits Shabana Saleem's definition of an autobiography is *Ḍagar Se Haṭ Kar*, by Saeeda Bano (1920-2001) first published in Urdu in 1996 by Sajjad Publishing House. It was later translated by her granddaughter Shahana Raza into English in 2020 as *Off the Beaten Track: The Story of My Unconventional Life*. Approved by Qurratulain Hyder as "readable" (Raza xii), it is a daunting tale of a lively, spirited, and courageous woman, Saeeda Bano, who had a mind of her own and believed in treading the unusual path. Her life trajectory is a journey from conventionality to unconventionality. A typical domesticated girl went on to become India's first woman broadcaster. In contemporary times, this may seem a trivial career, but in light of the restrictions imposed by society on women back then, her achievements are commendable. Her exceptional life and character would not be penned as an autobiography if her friend Shiela Dhar had not encouraged her to write her story. "She came across to her as an unconventional woman- one who had chosen to take the road less travelled" (Bano xi). The autobiography is a riveting narration of her life from her childhood to the last phase of her life. Framed in fifteen interesting chapters with exciting titles and embellished with fascinating, vivid photographs and pertinent Urdu couplets, the book is so insightful that it leaves the reader with much food for thought and introspection.

An autobiography pleads special cases. Only a self-approving woman with a self-sufficing identity and a feeling of singularity can attempt to tell her story to the world. "Writing about one's life, after all, indicates that one feels that one has proved oneself a match for life" (Dibattista 213). The autobiographer Saeeda Bano is no ordinary woman. She has an extraordinary personality marked by unique individualism. Her depth of thought, irrepressible spirit, grit and determination to act, faithfulness to her inner self, and self-esteem make her different from the other girls. She subverts traditional notions of femininity by going against established gender norms. Conscious of her singularity, she accepts:

> I was not like other girls, that I was carefree, outspoken, daringly bold, and extremely naughty. He knew too that my heart was set on playing sports and reading books. I used to devour anything I could lay my hands on, novels, encyclopaedias, autobiographies of famous personalities and even philosophical treatises. I had read Hume, though I couldn't understand much, still I was keen to read him. I had started learning piano and I played hockey. Both of them knew it wasn't going to be easy, fitting a girl with such strange blend of complicated traits in her personality..." (Raza 36).

The autobiography brings forth the picture of unconventional womanhood to the readers. Right from her childhood, Bano was brave and idiosyncratic. Unlike her sister and the other girls, Bano loved being on the field and detested attending classes. Admitting that her personality was

distinctive, she says:

> I was extremely obstinate, mischievous, immensely playful, anxious and God knows what else. This lethal combination had in turn made me quite fearless towards both my elder brother and my sister and I never felt sorry for myself when they scolded or reprimanded me (Raza 20).

Bano ascribes her personality to her Bhopali upbringing. She identified herself as rebellious and unorthodox. Her character's strength is reflected in the women she admires and emulates. She was in awe of Begum Sultan Jahan and her avant-garde progressive thinking. She was fascinated by women social reformers like Rani Mandi,[2] Lady Wazir Hasan[3], and Rani Ram Bahadur Shah[4]. Throughout the autobiography, she repeatedly emphasizes that women should engage in meaningful pursuits and bring positive changes in their lives and the lives of fellow beings. Society in those times insisted on observing strict purdah, and Saeeda Bano cites the examples of all those who did exemplary public service while in purdah. Endowed with discernment, she had a unique flair for sensing the subtle ways in which women were subjugated to become docile and submissive. She could distinguish between a man's and a woman's life - how men were privileged, and women were deprived, society's perception of women, and how they were subtly othered and kept on the margins of society and family. Her strength of mind and self-assertion mark her as a s a feminist. *Off the Beaten Track* qualifies to be dubbed as a feminist autobiography. The symbiotic relationship between feminism and autobiography colors the text. Helen. M. Buss, *Contemporary Memoirs by Women*, posits that gender (like race, nationality, class, sexual orientation, and other factors) affects each of our lives differently, and women's memories of life events are often different from men's. Saeeda Bano becomes an effective spokesperson for doubly marginalized Muslim women. She exposes the subtle subjugations that were meted out to her and all women of her community. In her article "When Women Speak Through Memoirs: An Analysis of Selected Autobiographical Works," Divya N says:

> Every woman's life writing indulges in a synchronisation of the female self-intricacies within the broader rubric of the historical and collective being. Inscribing a woman's self involves a constructive dialectics between the self and the other, formulating her personal history along the collective existence. The written mode of a woman's experienced realities innately and inherently modifies the historically archived memories through her interpretive vision. Hence documenting oneself

[2] President of the All-India Women's Conference in 1929.
[3] Wife of Sir Wazir Hasan, Chief Justice of the Oudh Court in Lucknow. She was known for her outspoken, fiery nature.
[4] An active member of Lucknow Women's Association and donated land for the Pramodini School in Lucknow.

> becomes an act of unconscious emancipation in the making of the history (147).

Women's autobiographies are marked by a dual consciousness – self as culturally defined, and self as different from cultural perception. In *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Rowbothen examines the role of cultural representation and material conditions in the formation of a woman's consciousness of self and argues that "a woman cannot experience herself as a unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as woman, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture." (qt in Sidonie 75) The tone and tenor of Bano's autobiography's first chapter, "At the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," strikes the autobiography's *leitmotif.* Saeeda Bano sketches the past and brings forth the experiences and events, offering a collective cultural history that has shaped her consciousness. Vexed by the continuing discrimination and the privileges extended to the men, she states her disgust in the autobiography by observing:

> The rules men had made for themselves within this same society were glaringly different. They had the freedom to do as they chose and they did whatever suited their own conveniences and preferences. Whether they had countless servants to cater to all of their needs or not, they were constantly socializing and could entertain themselves in more ways than one. They had the privilege of pursuing serious hobbies, such as attending poetry symposiums, literary events and taking part in debates. They could indulge their creative urge in a wide range of activities from painting to art and calligraphy or they could simply pass their free time playing various board games-täsh (cards), shatranj (chess), pachisi (ludo) and ganjfä. If they gambled or consumed alcohol, society simply turned a blind eye. Even if they gambled or consumed alcohol, society simply turned a blind eye. Even if they spent the entire night watching mujra or went as far as to indulge in ämrad-parastĩ (homosexual activity with underage boys), it was all forgiven and forgotten (Raza 4).

She is immensely critical of the subtle ways in which women were kept "prisoners in their own homes" and were kept engaged with learning sewing, knitting, embroidery, and cooking and how the "yardstick by which women were being judged in this society was based on such hollow values that women found them suffocating" (Raza 5). She is disturbed by the fact that women couldn't complain or hint that they were slyly imprisoned in the zanana and all roads to independence and freedom were closed. She is unsettled to see women passively accept their fate and how, without any protest, "they had learned to compromise with these unfair double standards that were in evidence all around them'(6). The writer unravels the devious patriarchal ways in which the female dissensions were contained. She writes,

> Men had granted them an exalted status within the four walls of the household. Any wish or suggestion expressed by their mothers, wives, and elderly female relatives was given sincere attention. Almost as a kind of atonement, women were given this importance so that they could somehow overlook the social injustices that were being meted out to the fair sex repeatedly (Raza 6).

Off the Beaten Track serves as an effective platform for consciousness-raising. The autobiography directly and indirectly asserts the role of education in women's empowerment. Saeeda Bano was privileged to access the best education at elite schools. Girls' education had just come into vogue but was still a privilege. While talking about her residence at Karamat Girls' High School and later at Isabella Thoburn College, she mentions the names of great women writers and intellectuals like Attia Hossain, Quratulain Hyder, Waheeda Bano, Prema Khanna, Sharda Rao, Sakina Zaheer, Shakuntala Jaspal, and Maya Ratna who had received excellent education and could be counted among women achievers. Long descriptions of her stay at these educational institutions hint at the importance she accorded to them and the grooming they provided. In Chapter Five- "My Husband's Home" of the autobiography, she shares how her father-in-law liked her for her erudition and had long discussions with her on several issues. Her education fetched her temporary employment in Lucknow and later a permanent job at All India Radio, Delhi. Bano conveys that self-reliance and emancipation of women cannot be achieved without education and is severely critical of society's double standards, which were eager to offer education to girls but were not prepared to accept their independent thinking:

> Educational opportunities were opening up for women and that made it possible for me to attend college. Despite this, the attitude of our community towards female education was somewhat ambiguous. We could not so much as dare to even think of acting on what he felt. Neither were we capable of objectively carving out a balanced middle path for ourselves, something that was different from the traditional environment we were brought up was different from the traditional environment we were brought up in and the ultra progressive milieu we were witnessing around us. As a result, our confused thoughts and repressed feelings manifested themselves in the form of constant rebellion and a persistent edgy restlessness. (Raza 37)

A distinctive subgenre of autobiography is confession, which is related to the exemplary consciousness-raising model. Confession is used to specify a type of autobiographical writing that signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author's life. In this context, Francis Hart observes: "Confession is a personal history that seeks to communicate

or express the essential nature, the truth of the self. Like consciousness-raising, the confessional text makes public what has been private" (qt in Sidonie and Watson 83). Confessional writing is an indispensable aspect of a process of critical self-understanding. However, this writing focuses not on specific problems but on representative experience elements to develop the notion of communal female identity. The objective is that the confessional self-exploration may help other women. The author's experience is "used as a springboard" (Sidonie and Watson 83) by readers to examine and compare their experiences. In an autobiography, the questioning of self is usually inspired by a personal crisis, which acts as a catalyst. In Saeeda Bano's life, this crisis came through marriage. She discusses her marital life and the ups and downs with the utmost frankness and speaks in the tone of a counsellor as if she wants all her women readers to learn and benefit from her experiences. In many passages she becomes so generic in her narration that it seems she wants to address her problems, as problems troubling all other women. Anguished by the dynamics of a successful marriage, she bitterly comments:

> The success of an arranged marriage in our society and its future well-being rested squarely on the sexual relationship the couple shared one another. Because the restrictions imposed on men and women only ever allowed a husband and wife to meet at night. During the day the bride was kept busy amongst relatives, or doing some chore or the other. Hence the foundation of a good marriage was based on the conjugal relations and the sexual satisfaction they shared. The need for the young bride, and groom to know each other or make themselves worthy of one another's everlasting affection and companionship had been completely overlooked. With the passage of time when the novelty of marriage wore off, differences would arise between the couple and it would become extremely difficult to maintain harmony in the relationship (Raza 47).

Discussing this "unfathomable puzzle" (Raza 48) called marriage, she advises women not to be over-sensitive in the marital framework. She recommends "the art of coquetry, the guiles, and tricks" (Raza 48) to make the marriage succeed. Frustrated by it, she counsels her readers to focus on simple facts, household chores, wifely responsibilities, and daily routines. She adds: "But when a person stops focussing on this simple, predictable pattern and gets trapped by the whimsical demands of their ego, difficulties begin to raise their ugly heads. You have unrealistic expectations. You start questioning if a certain behaviour is appropriate or not..." (Raza 53). Though she repeatedly pinpoints the shortcomings of this institution, she also accepts that her bold, outspoken, free-thinking mind was the root cause of her problematic marital relationship. Had she been like the other shy, submissive, conventional girls, her marriage would have worked out. In chapters five, six, seven, and eight, she tells the readers about her husband, who was a tactless,

simple person bogged down by an inferiority complex, impulsiveness, mood swings, and disease. Despite Saeeda Bano's commitment and dutifulness, her husband, after a trivial quarrel, left the house never to return and she was left alone with her children. Expressing her sense of hurt at her husband's strange behavior, she says: "But a man's ego and the right society has given them allows men to humiliate a woman as and when they please. The woman, on her part, must bear it all and remain silent, like an impassive pillar. She must never raise her voice and say to her Lord and master, in Mirza Ghalib's words: "*maiṉ bhī muṉh me zubān rakhtā ḥuṉ*" (Raza 115). Passages of this nature acknowledge the standardized nature of gender oppression and recognize that women's problems are not private but communal.

Saeeda Bano's autobiography is a revolutionary text that involves resistance against normative gender roles. She rejects the idea of an angel in the house[5] and opts for the ambitious, emancipated female. Just as she stresses the need for education, she accentuates the relevance of economic independence. After her husband deserts her, the bold, self-reliant woman in her resurfaces. Her self-respect prevents her from living off her parents-in-law and/or brother for a comfortable life. She decides to fend for herself and her children and thus decides to leave her mother and mother-in-law and take up employment at All India Radio in Delhi. By not confining herself to domesticity and rejecting pre-determined roles, she carves out her identity and gives herself a sense of agency. She becomes a trailblazer, asserting her identity and living on her own terms. Mentally prepared for the difficulties, she shoulders both, motherhood and career, efficiently. She accepts that "when a woman leaves the safe, tried and tested path of marriage and moves off the beaten track to lead her own life, she is, to begin with, severely condemned for her decision. I kept busy trying to preserve whatever bits of courage and inner resources I had, as I knew I must earn a living and support myself" (Raza 176). Later, when she looks back at her decision, she confesses her audacity: "On the measly salary of 350 odd rupees, I made the colossal decision to move to Delhi and live alone. The fact that I had immense courage and still do is pure coincidence" (Raza 179).

Saeeda Bano is the epitome of unconventional womanhood. Right from childhood, she believed in following her heart and deviating from the norm if it did not harm anyone's emotions. Be it wearing the color red before marriage, meeting Jamila Begum, who had married Brij Bhushan, or breaking social taboos like meeting the courtesan Akhtari Bai, and arranging her marriage with a family friend, Ishtiaque Bhai, Saeeda Bano had always

[5] Borrowed from the narrative poem "The Angel in the House" by Coventry Patmore published in 1854. Later in the mid 90's, Virginia Woolf wrote an essay "The Angel in the House." She uses the phrase as a metaphor for female purity and wholesomeness. Women during this phase were supposed to be modest, innocent, dependent and angelic or pure.

thought differently and made herself and others happy. Her career and her hardships granted her emancipation and strength but brought along with it, loneliness and an emotional vacuum. It was filled with the friendship of Nuruddin Ahmad, the famous barrister who later became the Mayor of Delhi. This relationship took her to the forbidden path because Nurruddin Ahmad was already married to a Jewish lady named Billy. Knowing that the relationship will not be accepted in her social circle, she keeps resisting it until she is convinced of Nurruddin's commitment. Chapter Twelve "The Forbidden Path" is replete with copious justifications for this liaison. Saeeda Bano is bold enough to reveal and expose her clandestine romantic life, but she does it for self-validation, an essential function of autobiography. While describing the happiness, her sense of completeness, and the sense of companionship that this so-called illicit relationship fetches for her, she critiques her marriage, which was devoid of love, understanding, and companionship. She indirectly tells her readers that relationships need nurturing and effort, which both she and Nurruddin used to put in for the success of their friendship, unlike in her marriage, where she only performed her wifely duties without getting affection in return. Rejecting societal norms, she chooses her unconventional marriage and ensures that she gets the approval of those who matter to her - her sons, friends, and family. However, whatever she did was with honesty and integrity. She never stopped respecting Billy; when the opportune moment came, she also told her sons about it. Like Kamala Das, she is not constantly searching for love outside marriage. She only accepts the friendship when she senses sincerity, commitment, and companionship. After entering the unconventional relationship, she does not conceal it. Feeling proud about her approach, she says: "I am not claiming to be a person with outstanding morals, but several times it has happened to me that my honest and frank nature has enabled me to overcome the most difficult situations in life" (213). Bano along with validating herself gives her readers lessons in wisdom and a code of conduct that all women should stick to. She confesses:

> In a conservative world shackled to age-old customs and restrictions for centuries I had chosen to break free and walk out, all alone, on a painfully complicated path filled at each step with dishonour and humiliation. And I believed, quite naively, that I could do this without ruining my reputation; that I could appease the longing of my foolish heart and not feel the thorny prick of my conscience (Raza 236).

Aware of the difficulties she will encounter in getting this relationship approved, she expresses how she stuck to the fair path and was sympathetic to Nuruddin's wife also:

> If you choose to walk over *pul-e sirāt*, the metaphorical bridge in hell, thinner than hair, sharper than a sword and surrounded by hot flames of fire, sharper than a sword and surrounded by hot

> flames of fire, you must stand prepared to fall or be flashed to death. I was prepared. Sometimes I stumbled, and sometimes I stood up again. But never once did I try and get my way using unfair means. There were moments when I felt utterly lost, as though I was enveloped in total darkness, unable to see the way forward, when my courage also failed me.... Once again, I would hold on fearlessly to the fragile bond of love we shared and move forward confidently.... But honestly both Billy and Noor journeyed with me through this painful agony. Both were casualties of this love (Raza 236-237).

Off the Beaten Track blatantly critiques patriarchal authority and how it subjugates women. Bano exposes how women were constrained within the four walls of the house called the *zanāna* where they could gossip, sing, dance, discuss, and nurture female bonding. In the *zanāna* in her husband's house-*Kashān-e Razā*, she got the warmth of her eldest sister-in-law and built a robust bond with her mother-in-law. Without marital happiness, this female bonding with her mother-in-law sustained her till the end. Even after her husband left her, she lived with her and got her unconditional support, even in the decision to leave her alone in Lucknow. Before going to Delhi, she acknowledges that only women of her family had supported her and how "despite being shackled to the conventional thinking of a highly orthodox society, both Chachijaan and Amma had managed to carve out a strong identity for themselves without letting ancient traditions dim their inner radiance. With their honesty and simplicity, they remained pillars of strength" (Raza 120). Saeeda Bano and the many women she writes about played positive roles in her life. They helped her evolve into a strong woman who had respect for her fellow beings. The autobiography celebrates female bonding and puts it across as a solution to the subjugation of women. It changes the age-old notion that a woman is the biggest enemy of a woman.

In her review of the autobiography, Nishat Zaidi observes:

> Saeeda Bano's life story folds in several significant social and political moments in the country and community life, especially from the gender perspective. Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jān Adā* conflates *āpbītī* with *jagbītī* and says, "*Luṭf hai kaun sī kahānī meṉ, /Āpbītī kahuṉ yā jagbītī.*" Saeeda Bano's life narrative is no different. It encapsulates the point Annie Besant made while writing An Autobiography (1893): 'At best the telling has a savor of vanity, and the only excuse for the proceeding is that the life, being an average one, reflects many others, and in troublous times like ours may give the experience of many rather than of one (57).

History, memory, and cultural constructs are sometimes reclaimed and reproduced thoughtlessly. History has not been very fair to the women. By devoting a chapter to Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum's Bhopal, Saeeda Bano

rectifies this. It is not just a historical record of facts and dates but a delineation of a real feminist utopia that existed early in the nineteenth century. Feminists, critics, and scholars imagine feminist utopias in literary texts but forget to acknowledge pre-existing legendary historical rulers who addressed women's concerns. She ascribes her feminist stance to Bhopal's socio-cultural milieu, which was "ruled by women for almost four successive generations" (Raza 8). The female rulers of Bhopal punctured the notion of female inferiority. They showed the world they "could match any man in intelligence and capability" (Raza 8). Though aristocratic, the Begums consistently worked for the well-being of her female subjects and wanted to eradicate ignorance from their lives by making provisions for them to receive a proper education (Raza 8). Several schools for girls were established, and orthodox families were compelled to send their daughters to receive proper education. She created a haven for women in Bhopal by establishing a ladies' club and massive playgrounds for older girls to play, and she started the tradition of ladies' picnics. The purpose behind this arrangement was "to improve the lives of women and by making it compulsory for them to attend the club, she ensured that they had the opportunity to roam about freely, at least once a week" (Raza 11). She wanted to instil confidence in the women of her state and make them realize that they can "enjoy such simple pleasures in life" (Raza 11). The Begums of Bhopal initiated the concept of female identity and individuality separate from their husbands' or fathers'. The official invites were addressed directly to Saeeda Bano's mother rather than her father. Saeeda Bano writes: "At social gatherings, women were introduced by their own names, not so and so's wife or so and so's daughter. This was the start of making women aware that they had an individuality of their own" (Raza 19).

The socio-cultural milieu of North India is vividly projected through the unique technique of spatial memory. The narrator pays special attention to detailed and elaborate descriptions of buildings, cities, roads, colleges, houses, and clubs. The titles of the chapters Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum's Bhopal, Lord Harcourt Butler's Lucknow, *Kāshāna-e Razā*: Ancestral Home of the Raza's, Delhi 1947, Delhi 1947 corroborate the relevance of spatial reminiscence to the autobiography. Bhopal can be visualized with a brilliant graphic description. In a glowing description of the architecture of a house in Bhopal, the author invokes the entanglement between spatial features and female practices:

> Well planned and functional, most houses in Bhopal had huge luxurious rooms, massive verandas, a kitchen, servant quarters and several bathrooms. They were architecturally designed to incorporate both spacious habitable living quarters as well as convenient areas for leisure activities.... Various design elements had been cleverly used to prevent the house's interior from being exposed to the public eye. The facade was always windowless, and all doors and windows opened in the inner

> courtyard. This made it quite impossible for the women living inside to get even a glimpse of the outside world.... the kitchen was located at the opposite end of the house from the entrance.... Since purdah was strictly observed and the *bāwarchī* was mostly a man. A *parday kī dīwār* or thick cloth curtain used to be drawn across the kitchen door. The *bāwarchī* was able to access the kitchen and exit it through a passage adjacent to it, without having to walk through the house. This gave the womenfolk freedom to move about as freely as they wanted within their own homes without having to come face to face with an unknown male (Raza 12).

The socio-spatial dynamics of the *zanāna* are elaborated to reconstruct the relevance of all female establishments to sustain women within the house's four walls.

Autobiography is also a valid form of history or unconventional history. It is viewed as a crucial and sometimes unique source of experiences disenfranchised in the dominant records of the past. Saeeda Bano's autobiography is a marvellous repository of historical facts and events that are unavailable in other written accounts. Chapter Nine, "Off the Beaten Track," recounts the phase from August 15, 1947, to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. Saeeda Bano had newly joined All India Radio and was staying as a guest with Iqbal Ahmad, who worked in some of the defense departments. The communal riots of the Partition erupted and seriously impacted Delhi. The chapter contains a very gripping and painful narration of how Muslims protected themselves by hiding in different houses and then taking refuge in camps provided by the government. In Chapter Ten, "Delhi 1947," Bano recounts the contribution and generosity of Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, who had used his home to provide refuge to people in trouble. He also sheltered Bano for several days before she left for YWCA. The Birla House speech of Gandhiji finds special mention since it was the first time that Bano had seen and heard Gandhiji.

Saeeda Bano's *Off the Beaten Track* is an exceptionally candid feminist autobiography based on the conviction that women are invincible and formidable. The account of her life is a full-throated assertion of the female identity and her resilience. Born in a conservative milieu, the author doesn't internalize the rules laid down by society but sets her objectives and denies any decree that hinders the development of the self. Written with a relational subjectivity, the book charts the movement of the restricted female to becoming the unrestricted female self. Dovetailing confession and consciousness-raising, the book articulates the voice of her community's silenced and suppressed women and unravels the deep-seated sexism in our society. It is a revolutionary autobiography celebrating the strong, self–reliant female identity and valorizing female bonding and unconventionality.

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