Dr Claire Chambers (Dept of English and related literatures, University of York) ‘Truly a person progresses by travelling and interacting with different peoples’: [1] Early Muslim Women Writers’ Depictions of Britain.

In this paper I examine the work of two women writers from South Asian Muslim cultures who crossed national and conceptual borderlines in the early twentieth century, spending time in Britain and writing about their experiences there. Atiya Fyzee and Shahbano Begum Maimoona Sultan were aristocratic women who wrote travel texts about their sojourns in 1900s Britain. I analyze the two women’s travelogues together, as there are areas of productive overlap between them, even though they are very different in style and tone.

These writers are elite and unorthodox in their religious views and lifestyles. However, between them they share some of the period’s common experiences of South Asian women, such as child marriage, domineering relatives, and purdah. Atiya is the more bohemian of the two, marrying late and having an unconventional home life. But despite her sequestration behind the purdah curtain and her natural timidity, the very fact that Maimoona Sultan and her strong-minded mother-in-law the Begum of Bhopal travelled to Britain in 1913 troubles ‘the persistent myth that Muslim women, restricted by seclusion, were automatically limited in the amount of power or influence they could exercise’. [2] For Maimoona and Atiya to travel abroad at a young age and unmarried, respectively, to do so with such an air of cosmopolitanism, and to publish accounts of their experiences was, to use Muneeza Shamsie’s word, ‘remarkable’. [3]

Finally, the paper will show that more than a century ago, Atiya and Maimoona were debating the ongoing and seemingly intractable problem of how to benefit from a Western education while maintaining South Asian Muslim mores. In their travels and writings, these women writers encapsulate the famous, if disputed hadith: ‘Seek knowledge even if you have to go as far as China’. [4] They educate contemporary readers with their texts, observations, and the often bold ways in which they lived.


