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978-1-107-03024-4 - Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness

Ruby Lal

Excerpt

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## Prelude

### *Opening the Door*

#### AZRA KIDWAI: THE GUIDING POINT

In December 2004, I went to Lucknow and Barabanki in the company of the renowned Urdu literary scholar and critic, C. M. Naim. My first book had gone to press and I was beginning to explore ideas for a second book. The obvious sequel to my book on the early Mughal domestic world, indeed the demand of several colleagues and a number of senior scholars, was that I write a second book on the later Mughals. I decided, however, to break what I feared would be a simple chronological extension and perhaps a repetition of my argument, now transposed to the structures (that I had already described) of the later, more visibly imperial, architecturally and archivally accessible period of the Grand Mughals. I knew I would certainly return to the Mughals at some stage. I needed first, while continuing to explore feminine forms and women's cultures, to challenge my own thinking by writing a book about female figures and domestic life in a rather later period on the brink of late Mughal and early colonial society. It was in this context that I had sought out C. M. Naim.

Naim Saheb gave me the most wonderful feedback a young scholar can dream of. Over the four days that I spent in his and his sister Suraiya Masud's Barabanki home, he spoke to me at length about the Hindi and Urdu literature of the nineteenth century and discussed the spatial setting of respectable life in that time. He also took me to see a number of other localities and respectable homes in the vicinity of

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Barabanki. And then he brought up a name that was new to me, and suggested that it would be invaluable (the word he used was “critical”) for me to speak with Azra Kidwai.

I found out that Azra Kidwai was the older sister of the noted historian and gay rights activist Saleem Kidwai. I had known Saleem for over a decade and had a professional-personal friendship with him. On our return to Delhi, Naim Saheb introduced me to Azra. When Azra and I began meeting, she was already aware of my friendship with Saleem, and my communication with her grew rapidly from there (I have seen Azra each winter since 2004, over extended periods in her Delhi home).<sup>1</sup>

In our first meeting itself I had the feeling of something special about my conversations with Azra. Here was a thoughtful and articulate interlocutor of the elite world I was interested in – although she is very much a twentieth-century woman, and the focus of my research is the nineteenth century. Statuesque and bold, she spoke clearly about her views. Our early exchanges were respectful, even a little formal – not the later, more sharing, affectionate and intimate ones that came with time and greater trust. Azra knew the earlier writing and research I had done and asked me about the work I wished to do. And she began working with me in a very organized, almost diligent fashion: drawing the very complicated kinship charts of the Kidwai family, explaining the relationships among the various branches of the family and simultaneously giving me a tender portrayal of her girlhood and womanhood.

Why Azra? A scholar, teacher, mother, who has lived in Delhi since her marriage in 1966, Azra was born in 1945 in an eminent, *sharif* (respectable) family of Paisar and Baragaon, aristocratic and landed groups on the outskirts of Lucknow in the modern province of Uttar Pradesh in northern India. The Kidwais are one of India’s great

<sup>1</sup> With Azra’s permission, I recorded all our conversations and took detailed notes. She spoke in a mixture of Urdu and English. All transcriptions and translations of the interviews are mine. Azra has seen all my writings related to this project. I have her permission to use her name in this prelude and in the book. The conversations cited above date between December 2004 and December 2010. This book project has been a central part of my discussions with Saleem, each time I met him in Delhi on various visits and again in December 2010 in Lucknow. He has also seen the two early pieces I have written on the subject of the girl-child and woman in the nineteenth century.

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families: the Barabanki branch of the Kidwai family is known to have been present there since the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The family has several branches – Baragaon, Daryabad, Gadia, Masauli and Jaggaur – and smaller ones in other villages. There were also twenty to twenty-five Kidwai Sufi saints.<sup>3</sup> The Baragaon family maintained close relations with the Farangi Mahall family of Lucknow, one of India's leading learned families.<sup>4</sup> Over the past two centuries, the Kidwais have produced many important politicians, lawyers, intellectuals and literati – men and women.

Azra was brought up in a highly literate environment, reading the literature and being educated in the models of the nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century didactic books. As both a participant and an analyst of the literary and material worlds in which she has lived, she narrates her upbringing in the light of the ethical literature and well-defined spaces of the elite homes in which she grew to womanhood. Four years into our conversation, Azra told me that she had been writing a memoir in the form of a diary (still unpublished). For her, she said, our conversations were an extension of several issues that she had already been thinking through over the years. She added that my questions were hers.

In what follows, I draw on Azra's reminiscences in order to suggest how these become a compelling invitation for structuring the arguments of this book. Azra becomes a guiding voice, providing the framework of what follows in the subsequent chapters. This book is about the nineteenth century. And it is not my intention to extrapolate

<sup>2</sup> The Kidwais draw their lineage from Qazi Qidwa (Qidwa meaning "elevated" in Arabic). He is placed by some in the fifty-fourth generation of Adam and by others in the fifty-seventh. Qazi Qidwa traveled through Syria, Iraq, Bustan and Mawra-un-Nahr in Central Asia before arriving in Hindustan. Khwaja Muin-ud-Din Chishti, the famous Sufi saint, advised him to go to the province of Avadh to propagate Islam. The initial settlement of the Kidwais was in the Barabanki, Lucknow and Faizabad districts of Avadh – in the central portion of Uttar Pradesh. The present family of Baragaon started with the migration of Qazi Muhammad Aman (fifteenth generation from Qazi Qidwa) from Rasauli to Baragaon sometime in the eighteenth century. For these details and an extensive discussion including family charts, see Riaz-ur-Rahman Kidwai, *Biographical Sketch of Kidwais of Avadh: With Special Reference to Barabanki Families* (Aligarh, 1987), pp. 5, 6, 11, 14, 85.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49–84.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent study of the Farangi Mahall, see Francis Robinson, *The `Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2001).

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from Azra's experiences and impose her feelings and responses on the nineteenth-century world.<sup>5</sup> Yet, her analysis alerts us to vital issues like the constraining role of physical spaces and the force of literary conventions in the making of a girl-child and a woman. Azra opens the door, as it were. Following her invitation, I chart a history of becoming woman through an exploration of diverse paradigmatic spaces, as well as a range of didactic literature, which I have called "lived" literature, since it has been in circulation for generations and is fundamental to the upbringing of respectable Muslim and Hindu girls from at least the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Another important aspect of my investigation has been an attempt to think through those dimensions of feminine lives and cultures that were nonexistent in my earlier conversations with Azra. There was no discussion, for example, of aspects of her life unrelated to domestic duties, anything tranquil and playful, until she heard me speak in 2009 at a workshop in Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, on the concept of "playfulness" (that is, resourcefulness, creativity and vision within confining arrangements). From then on, another narrative emerged in our conversation, almost a shadow discourse on pleasure and playful asides, close relationships and spontaneous, transgressive activities among women, very much a part of Azra's life. Following the 2009 interruption, and Azra's articulations, I have foregrounded the theme of playfulness in this book. My conceptual engagements with this and other themes will be clarified in the next chapter.

Although this prelude is written in an ethnographic mode, based on conversations with Azra spread over five years, beginning in December 2005, it must be emphasized (as Azra also put it to me) that Azra has already done the analysis that I present here. The frame and the narration is hers. What I wish to suggest is that part of what is implied in such a manner of history writing – where women (Azra and I) in the present hold the keys for the readings of the past that follow in the book – is that we challenge habits of historical narration in which we are chronologically bound. In the received disciplinary practice, the criss-crossing of chronological divisions (the nineteenth century, the early twentieth

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Barbara Metcalf for an extended discussion on the importance of this prelude for the book. And to David Lelyveld, who encouraged me to break chronological boundaries in thinking about women's worlds in our first conversation in New York City as I began exploring the nineteenth-century feminine worlds.

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century, the late twentieth century, the twenty-first century and so on), and the hypothetical different historical-cultural ethics of different times, to understand particular historical moments and figures, is not generally accepted. It is not within the domain of the general academic practice to challenge conventional periodization: to argue that a person in the present, as in the historical past, has ways in which s/he opens and shuts worldviews both of the past and the present, and that their views become the legitimate grounds for writing a historical past.<sup>6</sup> The way we think today, I argue, constitutes the past; it is not only the past that constitutes us. Hence the case for Azra's and my collaborative work.

On many occasions, Azra has said to me that it is because of me that she thinks back to her childhood. Azra is my accomplice who enables me to countersign the origins of a history in which women were rendered "nameless," in which they played but were taught not to play. Thus, the example of playfulness (creativity, almost an art of taking initiative within restrictive circumstances and domains) in a range of paradigmatic physical spaces (the forest, the school, the household, the rooftops) becomes a central trope in this book as I explore the

<sup>6</sup> Audre Lorde's call in *Sister Outsider* to employ non-master's ways of knowing, so to speak, has been quite central to my thinking as has been the case with a major strand of feminist methodology; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, 1984; rpt. 2007). In a review of the field for the journal *Signs*, Patti Lather locates feminist ethnography alongside the emergence of the literary turn in the 1980s and concerns about reflexivity, textuality and a questioning of the disciplinary boundaries of history. Lather describes feminist methodology as seeking "counterpractices of knowing in personal voices, archival resources such as diaries and journals, dialogic and interactive interview formats, reflexivity regarding interpretive imposition, practices such as cowriting." Patti Lather, "Postbook: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography," *Signs*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Autumn 2001), p. 203. There have been several other debates. For example, Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (Boston, 1993), where she claimed to record a Mexican street peddler named Esperanza's story "in her own words." This of course raised the important question, *a la* Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" And further, critically, can a feminist scholar record the story of a subaltern subject? This issue was taken up in feminist ethnographies that concerned the problem of power imbalances and thinking through experimental writings. Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis, 1994) is invested in charting how each new epistemic ground signals a new direction, in other words, how feminist ethnography's failures are in fact "productive." Visweswaran asks us to pay attention to women scholars' work with ethnographic dialogues and their difficulties as important strategies. Taking up Laura Bohannon's notion of ethnographer as trickster, Visweswaran conceptualizes the feminist ethnographer as a "trickster ethnographer" who knows she cannot master the dialogical hope of speaking with nor the colonial hope of speaking for; Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, p. 100.

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simultaneity of constraint, wisdom and desire in girls and women. Azra's explorations, and by extension, our social formations (Azra's and mine), become framing devices in the investigation of respectable, modern Indian womanhood and of feminine cultures. Azra's life, and her telling of it, provides an arc that enables me to think about the place and production of girl-child and woman in the nineteenth century – giving clues to an understanding of the past and of our present in complex and deeply contested ways.<sup>7</sup>

For the nineteenth-century northern Indian world of the girl-child/woman that my book focuses on, pictures of this “other life” of the girl-child and woman emerge in the popular tales in circulation, in the didactic texts, pamphlets, novels and manuals of comportment that sketched out the models to which women were meant to aspire. Azra grew up reading several of these books, and while her specific interpretations – in her girlhood and today – are obviously significant, and I turn to these later, another equally significant point comes through in her discussion of literary texts. “The world of books gave me access to worlds outside my own,” she said at one point. “Unwittingly my father gave me these books [although it was her mother who handed them to her]. My horizon grew from there. Some kind of idealism was created.” “Unwittingly,” Azra's father gave her the clues to think and interpret the world for herself, but the deliberations, translations and inferences were Azra's.

<sup>7</sup> Several historical writings have informed the writing of this book. The literature from South Asia will be discussed at length in the historiographical section of Chapter 1. On the making of women in the Muslim world, and practices and ethics of ethnography, there is now a vast literature. See the following works as important examples: Cynthia Nelson, “Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (August 1974); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1975); Lois Beck and Nikkie Keddie (eds.), *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge, 1978); Soraya Altorki and Camilla El-Solh, *Arab Women in the Field* (Syracuse, 1988); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999, 2nd edn.); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993); My debt to the anthropologists writing a range of impressive ethnographies on South Asia is great, and it is impossible to cite all the accounts that have informed my work. I am grateful to Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* and Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley, 1994), among many other important volumes.

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Azra's recounting of her experiences makes palpable several registers of "namelessness," a term used by the great Urdu writer Qurratulain Hyder in an interview she gave me on January 20, 2007. Azra arranged this meeting and was with me during the conversation. "Don't forget. Make this a central proposition of your work," Hyder said to me. "It's a deep feminist point. *Naam ka pardah tha*; at this time there was a veiling of names. Women were nothing but mother of such and such, wife of such and such." It was over a period of five years of interviewing Azra that I began to appreciate the multiplicitous character of namelessness that Qurratulain Hyder had invoked and that Azra had unfolded in her poignant recollections of a burdensome girlhood.

Through much of the late 1940s when Azra was growing up, her father was her chief instructor. What she read, what languages were important for her education and maturity, and even how she dressed, what she cooked, what her responsibilities were: much of this was decided by him. The responsibilities apart from keeping up with her school curriculum were steady: looking after her younger siblings, the management of cooking, sewing and knitting. Standing testimony to how respectable girlhood is produced. In Azra's extraordinary descriptions of the girl-child she was not, we find her father conjuring up the world that *he* wanted.

What also emerged in Azra's narration is that the world that the patriarch designed, however, opened up in unexpected ways. The abstract blueprints for women's lives, articulated by and for the convenience of the male, could never take away the life of the woman. Despite the order and regime of how a woman must conduct herself, there were spaces that a man could not access. In Azra's plays and games, in her interactions with other women, in her reading and thinking, in her anguish, in the physical separation of spaces between men and women, things were ordered in ways subtly or markedly different from ideal (male) prescriptions. There is a sense of another life, not outside the patriarchal demands and prescriptions, but within the confines of the social and familial structures, a non-male trace (even in the invocations and characterizations of male authors) of the more "undisciplined" life of the girl-child and woman that Azra leads us to consider.

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Two kinds of images pervade Azra's narration. One is spatial. She constantly refers to her four "homes": the apartment in Lucknow where she spent a large part of her girlhood; Baragaon (the paternal, ancestral house of a *Zamindari* or landlord family), and Paisar (the maternal, ancestral home of a *Taluqdari* family, part of a historically distinguished landed gentry, more aristocratic in demeanor and wealth than the *Zamindars* of the region) where she went during her summer vacations; and Matia Mahal, the mansion in Old Delhi where she went as a young bride. Azra's homes and the spirit of the four settings in which she lived enliven for us the different stages of her life. A second continual presence in Azra's recollections is the models of praiseworthy life drawn from literary texts and ethical digests that were repeatedly cited to her. "*Tum Akbari banna chahti ho ya Asghari?* You want to be like Akbari or Asghari?" she was asked, for example, in reference to the exemplars of Nazir Ahmad's famous book, the *Mirat al-'Arus* (*The Bride's Mirror*, 1868–9).

In both the spatial and the textual ordering of Azra's world, one gets a visceral feel for the place of nineteenth-century literature and didacticism in the life of a *sharif* family and woman in the mid-twentieth century that I analyze in the section entitled "Living Creatures in my Mind." This goes alongside and frames Azra's everyday life: how she set about the tasks she had to accomplish each day (besides keeping up with her school work), what she made of the books she was asked to read (the models were constantly displayed for her), what games she could play (different in Baragaon, in Paisar and in Lucknow), the spaces she inhabited and the intimacies and friendships she forged. I follow Azra's recollections on the importance of spaces and moments of pleasure in the sections entitled "Spaces Become Your Universe" and "The Pleasures of Paisar." I have chosen to detail Azra's telling under these three headings in order to remain faithful to her conceptions and the separations she makes in emphasizing what she calls "time and space" on one hand and "literary invocations" on the other when speaking about her life. However, the spatial and the textual cannot be separated in any strict sense of the term: in Azra's and in my analysis, these overlap and inform each other. These discussions are followed by a set of concluding thoughts in which I reflect on the invitation that Azra gives us though a construction of her life.



## “SPACES BECOME YOUR UNIVERSE”

“We were a big family in a big house. We were a big family in a small house.” Azra describes succinctly how her family and space were linked in Barabanki and Lucknow. Speaking about Lucknow and her girlhood, she says, “Physical spaces produce childhoods: from the front yard (*ghar ka baraamda*) to the shops and shopkeepers of Hazratganj to the boundary of my school. I recall the tamarind tree in my school, and picking up tamarind. Between classes four and eight, I had the same place in the class room. I could see the playground, I could see the clock tower and the post office. I didn’t have a wrist watch.”

Alongside this opening on her girlhood, Azra puts what she calls “invocations of the past” by her mother, Ruqayya, which had “great significance (*ahmiyat*)” for her: “There were invocations of the past all the time, wherever we went. My mother would always be saying (on visits to Paisar), ‘this was our [Ruqayya’s] father’s English drawing room.’ ‘This settee (*takht*) has an enormous value for us; each evening our mother [Azra’s grandmother] used to sit here. Boxes of betel leaves would be prepared, water would be sprayed on this settee.’ ‘Where the goats are now kept, this used to be the quarter of my *ustani* (teacher).” Azra explains: “I am living back in time. I am imagining the grandeur of my mother’s time. How do I narrate? Only by going back in time.”

Azra goes back: remembering different generations, their ways and how “spaces designed life and consciousness,” as she put it. “Spaces become your universe,” she said on one occasion. She asked me to consider this: “two generations living in two different times – in one space.” Azra explains: “my mother had a much more aristocratic upbringing. She was a *talukdar* [aristocratic landlord]’s daughter, the fifth of nine children. There were three or four women to teach and look after her. Her training was left to Bua (a caretaker) and others [Bua – a term of kinship referring to the father’s sister – was central in the upbringing of Azra’s mother, Azra and her siblings and then Azra’s two sons]. Bua came with my mother’s trousseau. Bua’s mother, one of five girls, was bought by my family in 1857. She never took any salary, never sat close to any of us; yet, she had close ties with us. After my marriage, she came to Delhi with me. She said she would leave my door only after her death. And she did. She died on 1st January 1986.”

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“From this [aristocratic life],” Azra continues the life story of her mother, “my mother shifted to a [relatively] humble establishment. Cooking, stitching. But she never complained. *That* was part of the training [Azra’s emphasis].” In giving glimpses of the lifestyle of her parents’ generation, Azra begins to dwell on the ethics of their generation, at the center of which was her father. “Father, brother, husband: a woman was supposed to be under their protection.” Clearly implied in the histories of the older generation and its ways was a statement on how boys and girls must be brought up, how they must behave, what they should and should not do – all of this differently from each other.

This is what Azra means by “two generations” living in “two different times in the same space.” The males of one generation laid down the tracks of life and insisted that the next generation behave exactly in line with the commands of the first. The women and girls of the second generation were followers and the older women the carriers of these directions: “My father insisted on my cooking from very early on. ‘*Hisaab ki kaapi dikhao*’ [show me the accounts], he would ask all the time. *Itni Badi*: a term that used to be in my consciousness way before I went to High School. I had to bathe and dress two younger sisters and a brother. Hugging, kissing for me came much later. They were part of the boys’ domain (*vo ladkon ke hisse ki cheezein thee*).”

*Itni Badi* is the phrase that Azra Kidwai recalled repeatedly when we began our first conversation on December 14, 2005. Her father used the phrase to describe Azra even before she went to high school, stressing not a girl’s growth (*itni badi*, literally meaning “so big”), but more significantly the physical maturity that is deemed dangerous. And with the threat of the sheer physicality of the becoming woman came a whole host of constraining and disciplining measures, expressed in the emphasis laid on her being a *sharif* (respectable) girl, required to perform the part of a *sharif* woman, which included distinct responsibilities and distinctly gendered ways of behaving from a very early stage in life.

On the gendering of honor, Azra says: “the male [child] is the heir to the family. Tradition, prestige – all of this has to be expressed in the power that the male exercises. Mother and children form one unit, with distinctions between the male and the female [children]. The girl is the most fragile as far as the honor and name of the family are