In broad terms this work belongs to studies on the cultural context of modernization in Bengal from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. So far researchers studying the cultural, economic, political and social aspects of modernization in Bengal with reference to the nineteenth century "Renaissance", the great Reform Movements, and the Women's Awakening throughout the century—have overlooked the question of Muslim women. In specific terms, this study focuses on the emergence of the Muslim "gentlewoman" or bhadramahilā in colonial Bengal and links it with the broader reform movements of the time emanating from the Brahma, Hindu and Islamic discourses. It also seeks to establish that this emergence as a cultural process was located within a larger socio-cultural reorientation of the upper/middling strata of Bengal Muslims, concurrent with the growth of the middle class itself, and that this process was symptomatic of a move towards an indigenous mode termed "Bengalicization". As such the women's question in this particular case was articulated within the problematic of Bengali Muslim identity.

The bhadramahilā was the female counterpart to the bhadralok. These two terms have been used in the main for Hindu and Brahma Bengalis. But this work, to a considerable extent, applies them to Muslim Bengalis as well. In the Introduction, we present a brief discussion regarding applicability of these terms in the context of this study.

The bhadramahilā's unfolding story is examined in three domains: the family, education and literary activity. These substantive areas are each divided into two chapters. Chapters on the family deal with various aspects of women's life within the structures and functions of the traditional, patriarchal family, describe how they changed and review the discourses regulating these changes. In education we trace the shift from home education to a more institutionalized form in schools and colleges. The various debates on female education aired in the popular press are then analyzed in the light of reformist ideology. Writing was the first site of the bhadramahilā's self-expression. The last two substantive chapters trace the growth of literary activity through selected writings; and then turns to the construction of the new ideal(s) of womanhood in the pages of contemporary fiction.
The study concludes with the contention that a reconstruction of the above aspects of the world of Muslim women in Bengal from 1876 to 1939 points to the emergence of the bhadramahilā through the process of a women’s awakening. Though this marked a step towards “emancipation”, this in turn may be seen as a shift in forms of patriarchy—a movement from private to public patriarchy.

Methodology and sources

The methods used in this study have been drawn from those favoured in pure historical research as well as other disciplines. As the purpose here was to recreate a period of socio-cultural history, a multidisciplinary approach was deemed more appropriate. Primary documents comprised of contemporary periodicals and journals, nonfictional literature and fictional literature, as well as religious texts and manuals in use at the time. Of these, the first, periodicals and journals have been used most extensively in this study. Archival matter (institutional records and government documents) were another primary source, though dependence on them has not been preponderant.

A source that was considered significant for this study was interviews or the recording of oral history, as well as memoirs and private papers such as letters and diaries.

From the corpus of Muslim edited journals (or periodicals) that cropped up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only a representative selection was made, largely due to difficulties involved in procuring copies of older journals and the time factor. For example, we could consult a few copies of Mihir O Sudhākar and İslam Prachārak only. The periodicals, usually styled “literary or social monthlies” (Sāhitya O Samaj Bishayak Patrikā), were rich in discursive material and have been used for the deliberations on issues that related to two of the institutions studied here: family and education. These institutions have been studied at two levels, namely, the main historical events or structural changes and the ideologies underlying these. As regards the latter, Clare Burton has pointed out: “The ideological realm is the locus of some of the most important of mechanisms by which the social relations, including gender relations of non-capitalist and capitalist social formations are reproduced and changed”.¹

¹ Clare Burton, Subordination, Feminism and Social Change, (Hong Kong, 1985), p. 32.
Periodicals still remain an untapped source for the women's history of the period. Two renowned Muslim edited English newspapers of the period were *The Mussulman* and *The Moslem Chronicle*. However, as the present work is a study in cultural history, reliance on daily or weekly newspapers, which were more concerned with bare events than the cultural impetus behind them, has been eschewed, except for a few special cases. The periodicals and journals which contained numerous creative writings of the period (some of these were also published later in book form) were extensively consulted for the chapters on the third substantive focus of this work: growth of creativity (besides family and education). Those consulted for this purpose were Āl Eslām (1915), 3 Islām Darshan (1916), Nabanur (1903), Mohāmmadi (1903), Māsik Mohāmmadi (1927), Sādhanā (1919), Saogāt (1918), Dhumketu (1922) and Shikhā (1925). A few relevant issues of Bulbul were also consulted. A very notable literary journal of the period was the Bangiya Muslim Sāhitya Patrikā (published from Calcutta during 1918–1923) copies of which are preserved in Calcutta. However, apart from a few writings by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein and two other Muslim bhadramahilās, this journal was not found to be particularly resourceful for the present work. Moreover, women's issues, though a concern, was not a major one in this Patrikā. The various opinions, ideas and debates aired in the popular press were helpful in reconstructing the period ideologically.

Some of the semi-religious semi-behavioural manuals advocating “ideal” role models for women were very popular in the period under review. They have not been analyzed before in any historical study on Bengali Muslim women. In the present work, such manuals have been extensively consulted and found to be a veritable source of information. This category includes, for example, Abdul Kader Jilani’s *Guniyāt-ut Tālebeen* (Bengali translation, n.d.), Ashraf Ali Thanawi’s *Beheshti Zewar* (originally published in Urdu in 1905, Bengali translation in 1961), Nasiruddin Ahmed’s *Patibhakti* (1926), Mohammad Ghiyasuddin’s *Taujihul Adāb* (1924), Ghulam Rahman’s *Moqsudul Momenin*...
(1932) and Prof. Sanaulla’s Ādarsha Bālikā (1937). A lot of the non-fictional literature of the period were published in contemporary periodicals. A few were also published, afterward or before, independently as tracts (e.g. Shirazi’s Stree Shikshā).

For the last two substantive chapters of this thesis, which trace the development of creativity among women and the portrayal of the new woman in literature, we have used some of the major fictional works published at the time. It is hoped that along with the more conventional historical sources outlined above, they will uncover aspects of the period which otherwise remained hidden.

As mentioned above, this being an exercise in cultural history, reliance on “solid” and “ultra conventional” historical sources such as government censuses, reports and reviews on education, gazetteers, secretarial records and official proceedings, has been of subsidiary importance. Our position here is quite similar to Borthwick’s deliberation on this issue: “Conventional historical sources, concerned with public life, are of only marginal use in research in this uncharted area.”

The bhadramahila’s own voice is very important for this kind of work. The significance of personal narrative in history is receiving greater attention every day. Of late, a sizable crop of texts on women and their writings have been published. All efforts are being made to compile women’s narratives, memoirs and autobiographical works. Access to these voices occurred through two channels: memoirs and interviews. The Muslim bhadramahila was not as prolific here as her Brahmo/Hindu counterpart. In this work, we have used as many memoirs or autobiographical works as could be located. Through interviews it was often possible to travel to times long passed and reconstruct lives of prior generations.

Period of the study

A word is needed about the dates chosen to mark the beginning and end of the present study. One could easily start with 1873, the year in

which Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani established her school for girls. Instead, we have chosen to start with a date which marked the publication of her book, to emphasize the varying dimensions of this study, which is an attempt to reconstruct both events and mentalities. In 1876 Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani’s *Rupjalal*, the first full length book by a Muslim woman in Bengal, was published from Dhaka. It was incidentally also the year in which Swarnakumari Devi, the first female Bengali novelist, published her work *Dipnirban* from Calcutta.⁶

Faizunnessa was not only the first to publish a full-length work, but also a pioneer of women’s education. In 1939, the date chosen to close the present study, “The Lady Brabourne College” of Calcutta was founded mainly—but not exclusively—for Muslim girls, and at a more subtle level manifest the Muslim community’s clamour for separate government sponsored opportunities. This gave institutional form to the struggle for women’s educational rights. So we have started with a book and ended with the establishment of a college to trace in the temporal arc of the title, the sweeping and diverse nature of the curve. The two dates symbolize the start of creativity and self-expression among the *bhadramahila*, and a realization of their educational aspirations. In the same year, the colonial Government passed The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act which, in the long run, had far reaching legal consequences for the family.

*Spatial extent of the study*

In the main, two urban centres have been selected as the spatial contexts in which the *bhadramahila*’s lives unfolded: Calcutta and Dhaka. But some of the important events also took us to other urban centres—for instance the towns of Comilla and Chittagong in East Bengal.

Calcutta was the great metropolis, the political, professional, cultural and educational centre of the region. It was in the vanguard of the major socio-cultural movements of the time. S.N. Mukherjee in describing the demography of nineteenth century Calcutta points out that “the bulk of the population were Bengali Hindus [and] Bengali

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⁶ Some regard Hannah Catherine Mullens as the first female novelist for her book “Phulmani O Karunar Bibaran” published in 1852, though it was more a didactic and proselytizing work than a novel.
Muslims formed the second largest community in Calcutta. The total Bengali Muslim population of Calcutta comprised about a little less than half the total Bengali Hindu. Mukherjee also points out that the majority of the leading Muslims were non-Bengali, i.e., the Persianized āshraf category discussed above. In 1911, according to the census of India, the two-thirds of the population of Calcutta comprised of Hindu and one-fourth comprised of Muslim. Other communities (the Buddhist, Ismailia, Parsee, Christian, Anglo-Indian, etc.), though a fraction of its population, also found a comfortable niche in its cosmopolitan lifestyle. The new intelligentsia of nineteenth century Bengal has been called Calcutta-centred, and justifiably so.

The middle class also lived in substantial numbers in the various semi-rural or mofussil towns which included sub-divisional, district, and also some divisional headquarters in those days. According to the census of India (1921), besides Calcutta and its suburbs, the only other urban centre which deserved the appellation "city" was Dacca (now Dhaka), located in the eastern part of Bengal. In 1917 it had two first grade colleges, a teacher's training school, a medical school, an engineering school and seven High English schools. The best seminary for traditional Muslim education of Bengal province was the Dacca Madrassa.

According to the 1901 census report, 48.8% Hindu males and 8.2% Hindu females were literate in Dhaka city. The overall Muslim literacy was only 18.3%. In the same year, in the district of Dhaka, 2778 persons were engaged in teaching, 285 in clerical services, 280 in the legal profession, and 168 in the medical profession. A large proportion of these people must have lived in Dhaka city and this points to the growth of the educated middle class here. As a class, the landed gentry was not as influential as in the case of Calcutta. Thus the educated, professional middle class could take the lead in the various reform movements in Dhaka.

Dhaka was the cultural metropolis of East Bengal. Though traffic between Calcutta, Dhaka, and other mofussil towns was frequent, East Bengal had its own particular regional flavour. Much happened outside these two cities—in smaller towns like Rajshahi, Barisal, Jessore, Chittagong, Sylhet, Bankura, Hooghly and Serampore—but constraints of space and time did not allow me to incorporate them. Calcutta and Dhaka, as the two most urbanized centres, offered a very appropriate backdrop for the bhadramahilā's story.

7 Mukherjee, "Caste, etc.", p. 7.
Other boundaries

The areas of employment and politics have not been touched upon in this study. Till after the 1940s economic participation was not a reality for the bhadramahila, though a very few of them took up a profession. (Lower and working class women, then as throughout history, have worked outside the home, but this was not true of women of the middle class, who comprise the focus of this study). Education was itself an end and not a means to gainful employment in the period under review. However, by 1939, one could safely speculate, women were certainly poised on the brink of some measure of economic independence.

Political participation was not as great as among women of other communities. There was sporadic participation in the Swadeshi, Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience or Muslim separatist movements, but participation never reached a significant scale. However, there was a great amount of intellectual deliberation on issues that were social and political e.g. the problem of Bengali Muslim identity, the language issue, Pan-Indianism, secularism and separatism. This points to future research.

Religion was an all pervasive part of daily life, and I have not dealt with it separately. But religion, religiosity, ritual, etc., could if desired be extricated from other issues and studied in isolation as a factor on women’s lives. The economic aspects of women’s lives (its influence on them and vice versa) have also not been studied separately. I have touched on them so long as they pertained to the familial, educational and literary roles of women. Constraints of time and space also set definite boundaries to the research. But religion, employment and politics could well comprise subject matter for another study.

Chapterization

The first chapter provides an introduction to the background as well as the theoretical framework of this study. The second chapter briefly deals with the context of change—the historical, social, economic and ideological impetus behind the women’s reform movement in colonial Bengal. In later chapters, the world of Muslim women has been studied in three domains of activity: the family, education and literature.

The institution of the family was the arena where the major part
of a woman’s life—traditional or reformed—was spent. As a social unit the institution assumed special significance in a colonized society anxious for self assertion. It was at once a repository of the timeless and traditional and a ripe area for change. Chapter III focusses on the traditional family structures. In Chapter IV we look into the changes and adjustments characterizing the family in transition.

Education was the great mediator between the private and public spheres, between the home and the world. Along with reform in the structure of the family, women’s access to education, were the major concerns of the reformers. Education was perceived to be a panacea for all social ills. It was through education that women first came into the public gaze and around this issue that they became vocal about their condition and rights. Chapter V traces the growth of formal learning from the first tentative schools to a full fledged college. The discourses on education aired in the popular press were immensely rich and varied. It was the issue most deliberated upon. In Chapter VI we attempt to analyze the major features in the discursive material related to the ideas on female education of the period.

Literature was the medium through which the women discussed here first expressed themselves. Their literary activity left behind a record for posterity and was also an assertion of their agency in those times. Moreover, literature was an important aspect of the Bengal renaissance and it is of no small significance that women participated in the production of creative cultural forms in this period. Chapter VII summarizes the development and expressions of literary activity among Muslim women during the period of the present study (from the late 19th century to the 1930s). Chapter VIII focusses on the portrayal of the New Woman in various literary works. Finally, in Chapter IX we conclude our discussions.

A few words are in order about the formulation of the chapters, specially determining their cut-off points. This was undoubtedly a difficult task for a project like the present one. For instance, in discussing the traditional family, the terms ghar and bāhir were elaborated. The moment one stepped into the andarmahal, one took along the outside. One could comprehend the ghar only with reference to the bāhir. Then the theme of prostitution—where did it belong? In the public domain of “work”? Was that all? Or was it an ultimate bāhir, a mirror image of the andar, constituted by residual but powerful elements of it? No doubt, categories seemed to slip out and absorb each other.
Purdah was another elusive category in the present study. It was simultaneously a concept that had accumulated an ideology around it, a practice, and a physical curtain. It pervaded all institutions in society family, education, politics, work, religion, culture. Described by some as an institution by itself, purdah could certainly merit a separate chapter. However, given the level of analysis of the present work, it could not be separated from other institutions and studied in isolation. So it had to be woven in.