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British women and orientalism in the early nineteenth century : a study of Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's "Observations on the Mussulmauns of India"

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BRITISH WOMEN AND ORIENTALISM IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH
CENTURY: A STUDY OF MRS. MEER HASSAN ALI'S *OBSERVATIONS ON THE
MUSSULMAUNS OF INDIA*

A Thesis

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in

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Katherine Blank
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Abstract

Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's book *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India* stood as a benchmark of British knowledge about Islam in South Asia throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although Ali's book was a seminal and highly regarded book, modern intellectual and women's historians have largely ignored her contribution towards the mainstream perception of Islam in colonial India. Published in 1832, *Observations on the Mussulmauns* countered many negative stereotypes about Islam that had become common in the works of Indologists by putting forth a new perspective gleaned from Ali's decade-long stay in India, where she lived with her husband's family in Lucknow. Ali has a uniquely insightful perspective on Islam because she was living in India after marrying into a family from Lucknow that belonged to the Shia sect of Islam. Straying from anti-Muslim ideas present in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Orientalist literature, *Observations on the Mussulmauns* contended argued that Islam called for the fair treatment of women and was closer to Christianity than most Britons previously thought. After its publication, British scholars and popular writers constantly referred to *Observations on the Mussulmauns* due to Ali's detailed descriptions of Muslim beliefs and practices. Ali's positive, firsthand experiences with Islam helped to change the perception of Islam in early nineteenth-century British literature.

Introduction

Modern historians portray early nineteenth-century European Orientalist discourse as a predominantly male endeavor. The European Orientalist discourse was dominated by male voices such as William Jones and later, Max Mueller even though many women produced large volumes about their experiences and travels in India. Contemporary historians have thoroughly characterized the impact of the knowledge conveyed by Orientalists on British society but little has been written about the impact of women's writing on British colonial knowledge. Most modern historical scholarship concerning women in nineteenth-century colonial India pertains to travelogues, as a majority of women's writings were personal narratives rather than collections of knowledge. However, there were compendiums of information collected and written by women that affected both mainstream society and the British Orientalist discourse. One such volume is *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*, written by Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali and published in 1832.¹

Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali was an Englishwoman who met and married a translator for the East India Company while he was temporarily working in England. She moved to his family's residence in Lucknow soon after their wedding, and after living there for over a decade, she wrote a book detailing daily life in Muslim society in northern India. Her book was different from the dozens of books written by British women about India because she did not write a narrative of her personal experiences. *Observations on the Mussulmauns* was purposefully organized into chapters, each pertaining to a certain aspect of daily life. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali managed to break away from the travelogue genre, which was generally dismissed by

¹ Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India: Descriptive of Their Manners, Customs, Habits, and Religious Opinion ; Made During a Twelve Years' Residence in Their Immediate Society* (London: Parbury, Allen, 1832).

intellectuals as being primarily for entertainment. As a result, her book attracted the attention of European Orientalists in addition to that of the average reader. Her book was so well-received that it became a popular source for knowledge about Islam in South Asia well into the twentieth century.²

Although Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali does not fit into the traditional definition of an “Orientalist,” her book about Muslims in India countered previously established ideas about Islam and went on to be referenced in hundreds of different British publications of all genres many years after its publication.³ It even gained the attention of Orientalists in other countries. Even so, little has been written about Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali and the enormous impact of her book on British knowledge of Islam in South Asia. The purpose of my thesis is to delineate the central themes present in *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India* and the way in which they were different from mainstream ideas about Islam and Indian. While Ali’s book predominantly focuses on Islam in northern India, she also discusses aspects of everyday life including social practices, the flora and fauna of northern India, and Hindu-Muslim relations. Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali’s unique living situation in India along with her empathetic approach contributed to her nuanced perspective on north Indian society and subsequent success as an author.

Contemporary historians characterize the early nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse as being comprised of male scholars. In *Aryans and British India*, Thomas Trautmann portrays

² In the context of this paper, “knowledge” refers to the set of ideas that Britons considered factual (whether or not they were objectively factual or not) about South Asian society. Most of this knowledge was gleaned from the perspective of Britons that spent time living amongst South Asian society and studying South Asian cultures. See Cohn, Bernard, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

³ “Orientalist” denotes a scholar of the “orient” while “orientalism” refers to the way in which aspects of eastern cultures were essentialized by western intellectuals and artists. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

the pursuit of colonial knowledge as an exclusively a male endeavor.⁴ Trautmann's scope of research is relatively limited in terms of gender and social class in that he analyzes the scholarly work of the "leading" British Orientalists. Trautmann only considers works by male scholars who were members of elite academic circles, such as William Jones and James Mill. This conforms to the historical narrative established earlier in the twentieth century by Moses Mohandas, who also conveyed the idea that elite male intellectuals were the most influential contributors to colonial knowledge.⁵ Ronald Inden directly confronts British conceptions of Indian culture, but like Trautman and Mohandas, only within the context of male intellectual circles.⁶ While Inden, Trautmann, and Mohandas manage to convey the influence of Orientalists on mainstream British attitudes, they fail to consider the impact of women's contributions on the formation of colonial knowledge.

Recent scholarship about British women in early nineteenth-century colonial India heavily emphasizes the idea that British women generally acted within the bounds of gender norms and primarily within British society in India. Antoinette Burton's *Burdens of History* argues that the early British feminist movement actively upheld imperialistic values such as the "civilizing mission."⁷ In *The White Woman's Other Burden*, Kumari Jayawardena deconstructs the negative image of the *memsahib* by highlighting the instances where western women helped promote anti-imperialist segments of South Asian society.⁸ Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's story remains largely untold because her history does not fit into the narratives already constructed by

⁴ Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1997), 66.

⁵ Moses Mohandas, *Dialogue of Civilizations: William Jones and the Orientalists* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009), 196-197.

⁶ Ronald Inden, 1986, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* no. 3: 401-446.

⁷ Antoinette M. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁸ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

historians concerned with British women in colonial India. Ali was not a charity worker, activist, or British housewife, so her role in British society remains largely outside of the roles most British women stepped into while living in India. While in India, Ali proactively sought out all of the information she could find about Islam. She consulted her father-in-law, local religious scholars, and religious texts to gain a better understanding of the society in which she was a new participant.⁹ After realizing how incorrect her preconceptions were, she felt obligated to write down her “observations” in order to change the perception of Muslim South Asian society in the eyes of British society. *Observations on the Mussulmauns* was the outcome of her dedicated efforts to learn and truthfully present her perception of Muslim society. Although Ali did not actively participate in the Orientalist discourse (meaning, she did not attend intellectual meetings or specifically mention in her book that she was reacting to certain scholars’ assertions), her book managed to help shape the conception of Muslim society in Britain, as evidenced by the positive reception of her book amongst both academic and non-academic circles.

⁹ Ali, 9, 27, 181.

Ali's Life before India

Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali led an extraordinary life that was highlighted by her work *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*, which became a benchmark of British knowledge of Islam in South Asian culture for over a century. Although Ali left behind an important legacy well after her death, little is known about her early life before she moved to India. The first appearance of her name in surviving historical records is on her marriage certificate, in which she is simply labeled by her maiden name Ms. Timms.¹⁰ English ethnologist William Crooke collected the scant details known about her life before and after living in India by at the end of the nineteenth century. Crooke later composed an additional introduction to her book that would be included in all editions printed in the twentieth century.¹¹

William Crooke consulted *Observations on the Mussulmauns* for his own ethnological research but was confounded to learn that so little was known about its author. Crooke traveled to Lucknow and interviewed descendants of the Ali family to find out more about Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's life, since she revealed very few personal details in her book. Crooke learned that prior to meeting Ali, her husband worked as a translator for the East India Company in Calcutta for a few years. Company officials later asked him to relocate to England so he could teach at the Company's officer school in Addiscombe. He met the future Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali during his short tenure in England and they married quickly after they were acquainted. A few months after the wedding, they both moved back to Lucknow to reside in his family's sprawling estate. Hassan Ali's family was wealthy and locally renowned, as his father was a retired minister for

¹⁰ Michael Herbert Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 130.

¹¹ Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, and William Crooke, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974), ii.

the Nawab of Oudh. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali lived in Lucknow for over a decade, during which time she recorded her thoughts that would later become *Observations on the Mussulmauns*. She moved back to England in 1828 without her husband and remained there for the rest of her life. Crooke found that there were conflicting explanations as to why she left India (and, ultimately, her husband).¹²

Ali never stated why she returned to England. Contemporary accounts state that she returned to England because she never could become acclimated to the weather in northern India. Later accounts, including Crooke's, contend that Ali's husband wished to take another wife, one of the few Muslim practices she could not bring herself to tolerate. Given that Hassan Ali went on to sire a number of legitimate children after his wife's departure from India, this is the most likely explanation. Crooke himself met with descendants of his children, who knew little of Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali other than that she was an "English begum" in their household. Accounts of her life after returning to England are also conflicting. A few sources published in the early twentieth century state that she joined the court of the Princess Augusta, the daughter of George III, but more recent historians have found that she eventually became the headmistress of a boy's school in rural England.¹³

¹² Ali, iii-vii.

¹³ Ibid., vii.

Travelogues

The fact that Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali did not include many details of her personal life is one of the primary differences between her book and a travelogue. Travelogues became a very popular genre during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century- one result of the growth of British colonialism in parts of Africa and Asia. Even though British women began producing travelogues as prolifically as did men, their works were typically regarded as light entertainment rather than serious sources of information.¹⁴ Men dominated the British discourse of colonial knowledge because their perspective was logical and objective, and therefore more authoritative.¹⁵ British women were subsequently relegated to writing “entertaining” travelogues, as they were perceived to be unable to grasp complicated issues such as politics and economics.

Women’s travelogues were considered entertainment because women tended to write more about “feminine” aspects of life, such as clothing and socialization. This is not necessarily indicative of what British women travelers felt was important, but rather how limited their interactions were with the local people. Most British women who traveled to South Asia did so with their husbands, who were usually officers in the Company. The local people with whom they socialized were associated with the Company and their visits were so short that they typically did not learn about the local culture or language.¹⁶ One example of such a travelogue is Fanny Parkes Parlby’s *Wanderings of the Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, which chronicles her travels across Asia and her interactions with local people.¹⁷ British women’s limited

¹⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 156, 160.

¹⁵ Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4-5.

¹⁶ Pratt, 156.

¹⁷ Fanny Parkes Parlby, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1850).

exposure to local politics, language, and philosophy prevented their observations from being considered knowledge and not entertainment.

Observations on the Mussulmauns is characteristically different from a travelogue because of its format and content. Ali lived in India for over a decade and socialized almost exclusively with local people, so she had a much more thorough understanding of local politics, religion and language, all of which she discusses in her book at length. *Observations on the Mussulmauns* is divided into chapters based on the topic she discussed. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali rarely interjects her own opinion and she refrains from including personal anecdotes (unless she is providing a description of a certain ritual or celebration). Stylistically, the descriptions of her experiences are very impersonal and she rarely includes any details about her personal relationships. Because “twelve years of [her] life were passed on terms of intimacy and kindness” with friends and the family into which she married, Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali had a much deeper understanding of local culture and thus presented a more detailed perspective than a typical travelogue.¹⁸

Despite being much denser with information than most travelogues, *Observations on the Mussulmauns* was initially portrayed by literary magazines as a source of entertainment rather than knowledge. Many reviews praised her book for its thorough perspective on life behind the *pardah* and its richly detailed descriptions of religious beliefs and cultural ceremonies. Most reviewers emphasized that her book was extraordinarily unique because unlike its author actually lived in the culture for years.¹⁹ Although most reviews of *Observations on the Mussulmauns*

¹⁸ Ali, xvii.

¹⁹ “Review: *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India, Descriptive of their Manners, Customs, and Habits*,” *The Athenaeum*, London, March 13, 1832, 41.

initially grouped it together with travelogues, literary reviewers recognized that her book was exceptionally knowledgeable because the author lived in such unique circumstances.

Within a few years of its publication, many authors and critics lauded *Observations on the Mussulmauns* because it provided detailed yet understandable descriptions of basic Islamic beliefs and practices. Initially, it was a popular source for the authors of missionary guidebooks but it eventually became a quintessential source for scholars authoring books and encyclopedias on Islam until the mid-twentieth century. *Observations of the Mussulmauns* became a practical reference for scholars working in the emerging field of cultural anthropology, as evidenced by William Crooke's initial interest in the book. Although it was not uncommon for women's travelogues to be used as sources on certain cultural topics (like clothing and food), *Observations on the Mussulmauns* became one of the foremost scholarly volumes on Islam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Making Islam Palatable to a Christian Audience

Although Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali covers a vast number of specific topics in *Observations on the Mussulmauns*, half of the book is dedicated to the discussion of Islamic theology and rituals, specifically presented in a way that would have made sense to her Christian audience back in Britain. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali clearly states that her objective in discussing the details of Islam is to present a true and faithful picture of Islam and Muslim society as she experienced it. Growing up in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, Ali was likely exposed to the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims that was conveyed by early British Indologists in their histories of the “Orient.”²⁰ Yet her experience living amongst practicing and faithful Shia Muslims showed her that in reality, Muslims were not the intolerant, violent people that historians and Indologists had characterized them as being. Ali felt compelled to relate a true and, in her opinion, objective perspective of Muslim society because her experience living amongst Muslims was so contrary to their negative depiction in mainstream British society. Her perspective towards Hinduism and Islam challenged prevailing British Orientalist notions of the Golden Age of Hinduism and the inherent barbarity of Islam. Although she expresses different views towards religion in South Asia, her views are still rooted in British Protestant cultural norms.

Ali explained basic Islamic beliefs in order to demonstrate that previous scholars mischaracterized Muslim society and religious practices. The majority of her knowledge concerning Islam came from both her father-in-law and the Imam at a nearby mosque, and under their tutelage, Ali familiarized herself with the Qur’an and Hadith.²¹ Although she thoroughly

²⁰ Trautmann, 66.

²¹ Ali, 294.

studied the theological particulars of Islam, she devotes the majority of her discussion about the religion to practices and rituals while emphasizing certain doctrinal aspects. She stated that “it is not [her] premise either to praise or condemn, but mere to mark out what [she] observes of singularity in the habits, manners, and customs of the Mussulmauns,” and in doing so, she ends up characterize the religion in a way that directly countered the prevailing negative attitudes in British society.²² Her purpose in focusing on the practical rather than doctrinal aspects of Islam allows her to convey that Islam is as, or more, celebratory and genuinely joyful as Christianity.

The first few chapters of her book are specifically dedicated to the description of the Shi’ite celebration of Muharram, in which she establishes that Islam (as it was practiced in India) is as ostentatiously celebratory as it is genuinely pious. Ali spends nearly one hundred pages discussing the visual details of the rituals surrounding the days-long celebration of Muharram. She does manage to include a very lengthy explanation of the murder of Hassan and Hossein, but the majority of her observations concern the colorful dress, the boisterous music, and the food eaten during the observances rather than the religious reason behind them.²³ In these descriptions Ali invokes a number of stereotypical Orientalist tropes, including the observation that the “emaumbaara” [imambara] housing the celebrations reminded her of the “visionary castles conjured to the imagination whilst reading ‘The Arabian Nights Entertainments’.”²⁴ Mrs. Ali includes this reference because it provided her readers with a familiar image, yet in doing so she reinforced the supposition that Eastern Muslim cultures are extremely similar and tantalizingly exotic. Even though her intention was to present a positive image of Islam in India that countered previous Orientalists’ negativity, Ali relied on orientalist imagery to describe her experiences.

²² Ali, 96.

²³ Ali, 7-94.

²⁴ Ali, 20.

Immediately after her description of the history and rituals surrounding the celebration of Muharram, Ali discusses the displays of extreme grief she witnessed during both public and private ritual. She carefully designs her “observations” of Islam to appeal to her largely-Anglican audience. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali consciously juxtaposes descriptions of grief alongside descriptions of colorful and joyful celebration to emphasize the sincerity of the reveler’s beliefs. She did this to emphasize that Islam is as pious as it is joyful, and to help her audience relate to the types of worship and celebration in Muslim north Indian society.

Although nearly a quarter of her book is devoted to her very detailed description of *Muharram*, the section following was dedicated to describing the daily rituals and practices of Muslims. In this particular section, Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali attempted to explain the reasons behind certain rituals (usually by referencing the Qu’ran or *Hadith*), yet her explanations oftentimes compared the belief to (what she believes to be) an analogous Christian belief. She explained that the “Sabbath” is observed by Muslims in a way that “could satisfy the scrupulous feelings of Christians” back in Britain.²⁵ She also mentions that “like true Christians, [Muslims] are looking forward to that period when Jesus Christ shall revisit the earth.”²⁶ She repeatedly emphasizes that “the Mussulmauns are already bound by their religion to love and reverence [sic] Christ as the prophet of God.”²⁷ Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali stressed Islam’s reverence for Christ as a way to convey to her Christian audience that Islam is much more similar to Christianity than was popularly believed.

When Ali discusses Muslim practices different from those in Christianity, she explained them in a way that made those practices seem more pious than their Christian counterparts did.

²⁵ Ali, 156.

²⁶ Ali, 425.

²⁷ Ali, 425.

There are a few instances where she states a preference for certain Muslim practices over those of her fellow Christian countrymen. She notices how highly the Qur'an was revered by Muslims, commenting that "the culpable habit of chandlers in England, who without a scruple tear up Bibles and religious works to parcel out their pounds of butter and bacon, without a feeling of remorse on the sacrilege they have committed."²⁸ She also expressed admiration at the fact that "when about to write they not only make the prayer which precedes every important action of their lives, but they dedicate their writing to God."²⁹ In addition to her constant praise of Muslims' piety, she stated that certain Muslim practices are admirable even compared to Christianity. Although she originally stated that she hoped to present a fair depiction of Muslim society in Lucknow, she focused on the aspects of Islamic/Muslim beliefs that Christians could relate to their own as a way to improve the reputation of Indian Muslim society in Britain.

Ali addresses Christ's prophethood in Islam at length to further emphasize the similarities between the beliefs of Christians and Muslims. She points out that apocryphal Shia text "Hyatool Kaloob [*Hayat Al-Qulub*]" contained a long re-telling of Christ's acts throughout his life, which she labels "a Gospel."³⁰ She states a few times that "it is the general belief amongst Mussulmauns... that Emaum Mhidhie [*Imam Madhi*] will appear with Jesus Christ at his second coming," referring to the Christian belief that Christ will return to earth during the apocalypse.³¹ She went as far as saying, "like the true Christian, [Muslims] are looking forward to that period when Jesus Christ shall revisit the earth, and all men shall be of one faith."³² Ali also recounted instances where Muslim acquaintances observed Christian holidays. She noticed that around Christmas, one "pious lady... fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and gave alms to the

²⁸ Ali, 71.

²⁹ Ali, 70.

³⁰ Ali, 162.

³¹ Ali, 136.

³² Ali, 425.

necessitous” for the occasion of “the Nativity of Jesus Christ.”³³ As she herself realized the importance of Christ in Islam, she remarks that “[she] was all the more delighted when hearing of this circumstance, because [she] had judged Islam by common report, and fancied they rejected, with the Jews, our Redeemer having come.”³⁴ She admits that she had misconceptions about Islam which she learned while growing up in England, and that those misconceptions were often antithetical to the actual beliefs of Muslims.

To further prove the similarities between Christianity and Islam, Ali attempted to explain certain Quranic verses by juxtapositioning them with analogous, or at least similar Biblical verses. She discussed a festival in northern Indian Muslim society which she discovered had roots in the story of Elijah, after which she directly quotes and cites a selection from I Kings.³⁵ Ali also explained the significance of the *Bakra Eid* holiday, which celebrates Abraham's sacrifice of his son to Allah(although she does state that the Qur'an deviates from the Bible in that it asserts Abraham intended to sacrifice Ishmael, rather than Isaac).³⁶ She pointed out that most Biblical characters also appear in the Qur'an, and commented that most well-learned men were acquainted with "the prominent characters in our [collectively referring to Christians and Muslims] Scripture history."³⁷ In doing so, she tried to legitimize the Qur'an and certain Muslim practices by trying to prove that they were similar to what was said in the Bible.

This is not to say that Ali's portrayal of Islam was entirely positive. In particular, Ali admitted that she was apprehensive towards the practice of polygamy (but her prejudice was based on social, rather than religious dictations- which will be discussed later). She also

³³ Ali, 162.

³⁴ Ali, 162.

³⁵ Ali, 290.

³⁶ Ali, 140.

³⁷ Ali, 92, 141.

considered Islamic dietary rules to be "trifling prejudices," which reveals that although she attempted to understand the society in which she then lived, she still acted and judged others according to British/Western normative behaviors.³⁸ She also considered the negative side of the religious "zeal" which she had previously applauded. Ali relayed the story of a young child who died of dehydration after supposedly being forced to fast during *Ramadan*. Although Ali claimed to have "not clothed [the story] in the exaggerated garb some versions bore," she blamed the child's death on "the poor wretched parents [who] were left childless through their own weakness and mistaken zeal."³⁹

Ali's portrayal of Muslims opposed the mainstream perception of Islam in early nineteenth century England. Scholars such as William Jones and James Mill argued that Muslim societies were inherently violent and savage, especially when compared to the supposed "docility" and wisdom of Hindus. This idea permeated the mainstream perception of Islam, as Ali herself admits that she previously held the same prejudices. Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali presents the opposite idea by saying that Muslims were genuinely devoted to God (the same God that the Britons worshiped, she emphasized) and that their religious celebrations were very festive, yet serious. However, her portrayal of Muslim society was still affected by the preconceptions she had as a British, Christian woman. She invoked orientalist imagery in her descriptions of *Ashura* celebrations, thus inadvertently contributing to the idea that Eastern Muslim cultures are essentially identical, especially to Western eyes.

³⁸ Ali, 424.

³⁹ Ali, 103.

Sunni-Shia Relations in India

Ali addressed the doctrinal and communal differences between Sunni and Shia Islam with considerable depth and nuance, even compared to the academic texts written by Orientalist academics. Still, she sometimes mistakenly generalizes all of Sunni-Shia relations based on her own personal experience of communal relations in Lucknow. Ali was most likely made aware about the communal differences because her husband's family belonged the minority Shia sect. Her husband's family was reportedly "*Syaads*,"⁴⁰ meaning they could trace their ancestry directly to Muhammad. Even as she first began to learn about Islam (from her father-in-law and the local *mullah*), she was made aware of the doctrinal differences between the Sunni and Shia sects. Even though her family and her religious educator were Shias, she does not state whether one sect was "truer" or more correct than the other. However, she does make a point to clearly state when certain practices and beliefs are exclusive to Shias.

Although Ali understood that there were differences between Sunni and Shia practices, she downplayed them and sometimes mistakenly assumed that Shia beliefs applied to Sunnis as well. She acknowledged that there was animosity between the two sects, which sometimes precipitated in violent confrontations. However, Ali admitted that she did not understand the anger between the two sects even though she knew the historical origin of the schism.⁴¹ This shows that although she knew the history that led to the sectarian split, she still had trouble understanding the significance of the political and social complexities surrounding the Sunni-Shia divide. The fact that she grossly overestimated the number of Shias in India perhaps

⁴⁰ This surname is currently more commonly transliterated as *Syed*.

⁴¹ Ali, 41.

explains why she could not understand the political and historical contention between the two groups.

Ali presents a mixed message concerning the levels of violence between the Sunni and Shia communities in Lucknow. Initially, she explains that the religious tension between the two groups only precipitated in violence “amongst the lowest orders of people.”⁴² Yet immediate afterwards, she goes on to describe the public celebrations of *Muharram* as “a real battle on the imitative ground of Kraabaallah [Karbala]” that represented “the bad feelings between the two sects.”⁴³ She also admitted that she was afraid of attending the public *Muharram* celebrations because she feared the violence would spill out beyond the revelers. Her firsthand experience of Sunni-Shia relations, especially during *Muharram*, colored the way in which she viewed Sunni-Shia relations in general, which she went on to characterize as “hateful,” “violent,” and “quarrelsome” throughout her book. She extended this description to all Sunni and Shia communities in India, but as historians and anthropologists would correct in later editions, Sunni and Shia relations were not nearly as volatile elsewhere in India as they were in Lucknow. Although Ali wished to present a positive perspective on Muslims and their beliefs, she sometimes inadvertently cultivated the stereotype of the “violent” Muslim so common in the historical literature of her time.

⁴²Ali, 42.

⁴³Ali, 52.

Plurality of Wives

Although Ali was more positive about Islam than most of her contemporaries, she did criticize a few Islamic practices- especially those that pertain to the treatment of women. The primary instance where she spoke negatively, at length, about any Islamic cultural or religious practice is when she discussed the practice of *purdah* and the allowance of multiple wives. However, she did not explicitly state that she disagreed with the practice. Instead, she made the effort to explain how polygamy functioned in genteel northern Indian society. With regard to multiple wives, Ali made sure to explain the unspoken social rules that dictated each wife's place, so as not to give the impression that all Muslim men maintained so-called *harems*. She explained that "the first marriage of a Mussulmaun is the only one where a public display of the ceremony is deemed necessary, and the first wife is always considered the head of his female establishment."⁴⁴ She downplays the social role of subsequent wives, saying that later wives are taken primarily to ensure that the husband produces an heir. Ali also claimed that the other family members observed the marital hierarchy, saying that "not only do the secondary wives pay this respect to the first, but the whole circle of relations and friends make the same distinction... For the first wife takes precedence in every way."⁴⁵ Ali constantly emphasized that both the family, as well as society as a whole, respects the first wife as the "true" wife and the lady of the house. The rest of the wives are principally for procreative purposes.

While most of her discussion about the plurality of wives is relatively neutral, she lastly adds that it was common for Muslim men in northern India to treat their secondary wives more poorly than their first wives. She contended that a Muslim man's "conscience rests unaccustomed

⁴⁴ Ali, 181.

⁴⁵ Ali, 181.

when he adds to his numbers," and that he "cannot reproach himself with having neglected or unkindly treated any of the number bound to him."⁴⁶ She goes on to explain that "the affluent, the sensualist, and the ambitious, are most prone to swell the numbers in their [household]" and that "with some men, who are not highly gifted intellectually, it is an esteemed mark of gentility to have several wives."⁴⁷ While she did not harshly criticize the practice on moral grounds (which many British women did in their own writings), she snidely remarked that less intelligent men compensate by taking multiple wives.

However, she bookends her criticism of the plurality of wives with the explanation that Mohammed intended to improve women's lives by limiting the number of possible wives to four. She stated that according to her historical sources, Mohammed existed at a time when "the Arabians were a most abandoned and dissolute people," because "they all possessed crowded harems" where women were subjected to "the vilest state of bondage."⁴⁸ Ali also makes sure to mention that Mohammed commanded that men with multiple wives must treat each wife equally, therefore her criticism is derived from situations in which religious commandments are broken. Her criticism is not about the practice itself; she only had a problem when men abused their right to take multiple wives by mistreating them.

Considering how Muslim society was portrayed in British society, it is no surprise that Ali is less enthusiastic about the allowance of multiple wives in Islam. However, her opinion may have been affected by her individual circumstances surrounding the relationship between herself and her husband. Ali lived in India just over a decade before permanently returning to England. She wrote *Observations on the Mussulmauns* after her return. In the decades after the

⁴⁶ Ali, 181.

⁴⁷ Ali, 182.

⁴⁸ Ali, 179-180.

initial publication of her book, numerous reviewers speculated as to why she returned so suddenly and permanently. A historian familiar with many members of the Lucknow elite initially stated that Ali returned to England because her health had suffered in India's climate.⁴⁹ However, William Crooke investigated the situation decades later and discovered that Ali's husband went on to have many legitimate children, which showed Crooke that the Mir Hassan Ali had taken another wife himself. Although it is not certain that Ali left India because of her husband's desire to marry another wife, the situation in her own marriage most likely affected the way she portrayed the practice of polygamy in Islam.

⁴⁹ William Knighton, *The Private Life of an Eastern King* (London: Hope and Co, 1855), 208.

Hinduism

Ali diverged from the typical portrayal of Muslims in mainstream British society by arguing that Muslims are more similar to European Christians than most believed. However, her portrayal of Hindus supports the ideas Orientalists disseminated amongst British society beginning in the late eighteenth century. Like her portrayal of Muslims, Ali characterizes Hindu religious and cultural practices as neither wholly good nor bad. Ali praised certain aspects of Hindu culture, such as the increased amount of freedom given to women to move freely in the public. Ali criticized the practice of what she called “idol worship,” which she deemed barbaric and superstitious. All of these observations and conclusions, like her observations about Islam, reflect Ali’s unspoken preference towards practices that are more similar to western rather than South Asian practices.

Ali spent the majority of her time in India in the company of Muslims, but she mentioned that she spent a couple of months in a small town outside of Lucknow called “Kannoge.”⁵⁰ This is where the majority of her exposure to Hindu culture came from. While in Kannoge, Ali lived in a centuries-old castle that was at that time inhabited by East India Company officers. She spent her days exploring the Hindu temples and ruins around the town.⁵¹ It is important to note that she did not study or learn about Hinduism from any academic sources. Her knowledge of Hinduism came from touring Hindu temples and from the opinions of those with whom she casually conversed. Thus, it is likely that her preconceptions about Hinduism influenced her perception of Hindu practices.

⁵⁰ “Kannoge” most likely refers to Kannauj, which is located approximately 75 miles east of Lucknow.

⁵¹ Ali, 125.

Most of Ali's criticisms of Hindu society were rooted in disgust for certain religious practices that she believed were sacrilegious. She began her discussion of Hinduism by stating that "I may remark without prejudice, from what I have been enabled to glean in conversation with a few Hindoos of this city, that they have a better idea of one over-ruling Supreme power than I have been able to find elsewhere."⁵² However, a number of overtly negative descriptions of Hindu religious practices later tempered this positive remark. She thought that although her Hindu acquaintances accepted a single Supreme power, that they were "men of good moral standard, yet in a state of deplorable ignorance."⁵³ While exploring temple ruins on the outskirts of Kannoge, Ali states that a statue of the goddess Lakshmi "struck [her] as more resembling the European than the Asiatic," but that "the Hindoos however make it an object of their impure and degrading worship."⁵⁴ The idea that the Lakshmi statue resembled "the European" rather than "the Asiatic" echoes sentiments expressed by Orientalists, who believed in the Aryan origin theory of European culture. Yet Ali regarded the actual worship as "impure" and "degrading" even though she does not explain why the practices disturbed her.

The most positive aspect of her stay in Kannoge was that Ali felt she could move more freely in the public than in Lucknow. In her home in Lucknow, Ali lived in the *zenana* (the women's quarters of the household) with her husband's female relatives. When she traveled in Lucknow, an elder female relative, her husband, or her father-in-law always accompanied her.⁵⁵ In Kannoge, she:

could indulge in long walks without incurring the penalty of a departure from an established custom...Should any woman venture to walk abroad in Lucknow, for

⁵² Ali, 145.

⁵³ Ali, 146.

⁵⁴ Ali, 147.

⁵⁵ Ali, 322.

instance,-to express the most liberal opinion of the act-, she would be judged by the Natives as a person careless of the world's opinion. But [in Kannoge she] was under no such restraint.⁵⁶

She did not directly attribute the difference in attitude to religious differences, yet she did remark later that her husband's family's status as a pious Shia household kept her from walking alone in town.⁵⁷ Unlike her situation in Lucknow, Ali was surrounded by Hindu (or fellow British Christian) companions in Kannoge and did not feel compelled to adhere to such strict social customs.

Although Ali appreciated that Hindu women could generally move more freely in the public sphere, she criticized the prevalence of female infanticide amongst Hindu society. Infanticide, especially female infanticide, would become a popular trope in British literature pertaining to India.⁵⁸ This trope became prominent because it was repeatedly mentioned in books such as *Observation of the Mussulmauns*. Ali mentioned that it was common for Hindus in India “to follow the example of the Rajpoots [*Rajputs*],” and “destroy the greater proportion of females at birth.”⁵⁹ She immediately counters this observation with the assurance that “in the present age, this horrid custom is never heard of amongst any classes of the Mussulmaun population.”⁶⁰ Ali used “this horrid custom” to further prove that Muslim society had not caused the degeneration of Hindu culture, and that Muslim practices were not as barbaric as certain Hindu practices.

⁵⁶ Ali, 152.

⁵⁷ Ali, 8-13.

⁵⁸ Harald Fischer-Tine and Michael Mann, *Colonialism As Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 19.

⁵⁹ Ali, 349.

⁶⁰ Ali, 349.

Ali directly confronted the idea that the Muslim “invaders” corrupted early Hindu culture by pointing out that Hindus alone practiced certain “horrid customs.” She bolstered her argument further by noting that the marriage rituals were similar amongst both Hindus and Muslims, meaning that Muslims adapted to Hindu practices rather than destructively forcing their own practices on Hindus. She said that, “I am rather disposed to conjecture that [the marriage ceremony] is one of the customs of the aborigines, imitated by the invaders, as the outward parade and publicity given to the event by the Mussulmauns, greatly resemble those of the surrounding Hindoos.”⁶¹ She also noted that the marriage celebrations she witnessed amongst Muslim society in Lucknow did not resemble the ceremonies of “any other societies of Mussulmauns distinct from those of Hindoostan.”⁶² Ali contradicted the Indologist notion that Muslim “invaders” negatively impacted Hindu culture by emphasizing that Muslim society adopted Hindu cultural practices, while eschewing certain “horrid” practices.

Like her portrayal of Islam, Ali portrayed Hinduism as neither wholly good nor bad. She appreciated that many Hindus accepted the existence of a supreme being, which she felt was similar to her own Christian beliefs. She also appreciated that she could walk in a town primarily filled with Hindus without feeling that she was ruining her reputation, or the reputation of her husband’s family. However, she also described the Hindu’s worship as “degrading” and the Hindus themselves as ignorant. Ali’s description of Hinduism is pointedly more negative than her portrayal of Muslim beliefs, which challenges the Orientalist narrative of Muslim barbarian culture dominating a docile Hindu society.

⁶¹ Ali, 371.

⁶² Ali, 371.

Ali's Personal Spirituality

Throughout *Observations on the Mussulmauns*, Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali makes it very clear that she herself was an observant Christian. She refrains from discussing her personal sense of spirituality until the very end of the book, where she laments the fact that she could not convert anyone to Christianity. While she did not go to India with the expressed interest of converting, her evangelizing attitude reveals that although she lived with a Muslim family and participated in every religious event for over a decade, she still considers herself an outsider with an obligation to convert someone to the “more correct” faith.

She refrained from discussing her personal feelings towards Christianity until the last paragraphs of the books, where she laments that, “it may be regretted, with all of my influence, that I have not been the humble instrument of conversion.”⁶³ She went on to say that she felt unworthy of the task, and that it would have been difficult to sway her acquaintances from a religion already so close to Christianity. Ali even referred to her stay in Lucknow as “my pilgrimage in a strange land,” which gives the impression that Ali felt her purpose in moving to India was religious, rather than personal.⁶⁴ Her regret was soothed as she felt that her presence in Lucknow convinced her family and close friends “that the professors of Christianity are not idolators” as they had thought previously.⁶⁵ However, the most striking statement from her conclusion (and a statement that she repeats a few times over) is that she felt that she “was received amongst them without prejudice, and allowed free usage of my European habits and religious principles without a single attempt to bias or control me.”⁶⁶ Orientalist scholars built

⁶³ Ali, 424.

⁶⁴ Ali, 376.

⁶⁵ Ali, 425.

⁶⁶ Ali, 423.

their narratives of Indian history on the assumption that Muslim society was intolerant of other beliefs, or in rare case of religious toleration, that the others were subjected to mistreatment by the Muslim ruling class. Ali's statement went directly against this narrative by professing that she was allowed to live as she wished. This statement also shows that Ali still tightly held onto her own culture in lieu of adopting the normative practices of her new residence.

Considering her own religiosity, Ali presented Islam in an entirely different light than previous Orientalist intellectuals and travel writers. Ali intentionally counters the idea that Muslim society degraded "golden" Hindu culture by pointing out "barbaric" practices that were carried out solely by Hindus. She also drew numerous connections between Christian and Muslim beliefs in order to convey the idea that Islam was more similar to Christianity than not. Even though Ali intentionally attempted to reform the reputation of Indian Muslims amongst British society, she used Orientalist imagery to describe her physical surroundings and expressed regret that she was not able to convert anyone to Christianity. Her book was a departure from the entirely negative depiction of Islam in South Asia, though she still fell into the same trappings of a Protestant British, imperialistic mentality.

Life Behind the *Purdah*

Besides Ali's knowledge about the intricacies of Islamic doctrine, her experience in the *zenana* of her husband's family's household was an insightful perspective of upper-class women's lives in northern India. It was so insightful that historians and anthropologists did and continue to use it as the go-to source for life inside the *zenana*. Whereas female British travel writers often visited the *zenana* of upper-class households during their travels, no British women had lived in themselves, let alone for over a decade. Because of her extended experience, Ali dedicates a whole chapter on life in the *zenana*, where she neither wholeheartedly criticizes nor praises the practice. Because of her experiences, Ali explicitly includes the role of women in various aspects of daily life and cultural practices in order to disprove the idea that Muslim women were submissive prisoners subject to the whims of their husbands and fathers.

It is important to note that Ali was not obligated to conform to the same social restraints placed upon the other female members of her husband's family. Because she was English, Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali enjoyed certain privileges (including a life outside of the *zenana*) that were otherwise forbidden to Muslim ladies of a comparable social standing. While Ali spent most of the daytime in the *zenana* of her family's home, she was allowed to interact with unrelated men as she freely wished. Ali became good friends with a woman who expressed her wish to someday see a bridge over a large river, as she had never seen one herself. Ali took it upon herself to ask for the permission from her husband to take the woman with her to visit a nearby bridge. Ali said that "I undertook to gain permission from her husband and father... they, however, did not approve of the lady being gratified, and I was vexed to be obliged to convey the

disappointment to my friend.”⁶⁷ Although she did not explicitly state so, she was clearly allowed to freely approach and speak with unrelated male company. As she mentioned in the last paragraphs of her book, her husband’s family did not try to force their own cultural standards upon her. Her husband’s employment with the East India Company likely contributed to her special treatment. Additionally, as Ali stated previously in her book, the idea of *purdah* was to prevent a woman from losing honor in the public eye. As a white British woman, she would not have been expected to conform to those social standards in the first place. In a way, she was “immune” from the damaged reputation that a local woman seen consorting with a unrelated man would have experienced.

Ali thoroughly described the physical aspects of her family’s *zenana*, knowing how novel the practice would be to her readers. Her choice of words in describing her daily surroundings reveals how Ali herself felt –or how she intentionally wished to portray- women’s continuous seclusion from public life. She described the quarters as “tolerably sized,” as if to avoid the impression that the women are locked away in a tight room.⁶⁸ Ali then goes on to describe in great detail the richness and workmanship of the fabric that made up the *purdah* and the cushioned *musnad* pillow.⁶⁹ Although she admits that the quarters do not contain a mirror or other decorative objects, Ali otherwise described the *zenana* as very lush and comfortable for its inhabitants.

Despite the women’s seclusion from public society, Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali repeatedly emphasized that the women in the *zenana* were never alone and always surrounded by cheerful company. The exclusion of upper-class women from public life became a mainstay in British

⁶⁷ Ali, 315.

⁶⁸ Ali, 304.

⁶⁹ Ali, 305.

criticism of South Asian society near the middle of the century, although this trope had yet to surface in literature from the early nineteenth century. Many popular travelogues written by British women in the early nineteenth century described life in the *zenana* as luxurious yet monotonous. Ali responded to the other writer's observations by sharing her own perspective on life in the *zenana*, which she conveyed as being social and lively. Ali stated that "the buzz of human voices, the happy playfulness of the children, the chaste singing of the *dominies* [singers/entertainers] fill up the animated picture."⁷⁰ She did admit that "at first [she] pitied the apparent monotony of their lives; but this feeling has worn away by intimacy of the people who are thus precluded from mixing with the rest of the world."⁷¹ Rather than the dull, dreary picture presented by authors such as Maria Graham and Marianna Postans, Ali described the *zenana* as a lively place full of entertainment, where women could cultivate close friendships with other women away from the distractions of the outside world.

Another common concern for the *zenana* women mentioned in many travelogues was the lack education given to the inhabitants. Travelogue authors consistently remarked upon the "ignorance" of the women in the *zenana* because of their lack of a formal western education. Ali departs from this perspective by blaming it on their lack of resources, such as libraries and western-style schools, rather than their personalities (as many other authors did). She said that, "they have not, it is true, many intellectual resources, but they have naturally good understandings, and having learned their duty strive to fulfill it."⁷² She then went on to describe the positive attributes of the typical woman living in the *zenana*, saying that they are "obedient

⁷⁰ Ali, 312.

⁷¹ Ali, 313.

⁷² Ali, 313.

wives, kind mistresses, sincere friends, and liberal benefactresses to the poor.”⁷³ Instead of belaboring the women’s intellectual insufficiencies, Ali turns the argument around and lists the ways in which the women contribute towards the wellbeing of their family and community despite their lack of schooling. Rather than criticizing the lack of formal education given to the women, Ali portrays the women as entirely competent and valuable members of society.

Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali’s overall opinion of life in the *zenana* is anachronistically relativistic in that she considered that the *zenana* women might find English women’s lives similarly monotonous or otherwise unpleasant. Ali believed that “they perhaps wonder equally at some of our modes of dissipating time, and fancy we might spend it more properly.”⁷⁴ Ali also mentions that the women are accustomed from that kind of life from infancy, and that they do not yearn for any other lifestyle. She argued that the women’s seclusion from non-related male company is beneficial to the women, because “they are preserved from a variety of snares and temptations” that they would have to face in mixed company.⁷⁵ Unlike many of her contemporaries who shuddered at the idea of seclusion, Ali considered the use of *purdah* as simply another lifestyle that had its advantages along with its disadvantages.

According to Ali, the primary advantage of life in the *zenana* is the constant companionship women and servants provide. According to Ali, “to be alone is a trial which [the women] are seldom exposed” because “every lady [has] companions amongst her dependents.”⁷⁶ Ali felt that women living in the *zenana* were less lonely than European women because they were constantly surrounded by the other women of the household in addition to a bevy of personal servants. Ali did not focus on the lack of formal education or life experiences of the

⁷³ Ali, 314.

⁷⁴ Ali, 314.

⁷⁵ Ali, 314-315.

⁷⁶ Ali, 323.

women in the *zenana*. She emphasized that the women did not know any other life, and that they were never lonely.

Ali did more than just describe the secluded lifestyle of upper-class women- she described the origins of the practice itself in south Asia. Her “history” of the practice of *purdah* was researched on her own. Unsurprisingly, her history of *purdah* explains that the practice came from Muslims invaders, which was exactly what Orientalist and Utilitarian historians argued before her. The difference between the narrative established by published scholars and Ali was that Ali did not consider the practice of *purdah* restrictive or abusive. Ali noted, “in Arabia and Persia the females are allowed to walk or ride about with a sort of hooded cloak” to maintain their propriety.⁷⁷ According to Ali’s research, the widespread practice of *purdah* arose after fourteenth-century conqueror Tamerlane [Timur] came to control parts of modern northern India. Out of the fear that his tribeswomen would have relations with local Hindu men, “[Tamerlane] commanded that [the women] should be confined to their own apartments and behind the *purdah*, disallowing any intercourse with males” unless they were in the “prescribed limits of consanguinity.”⁷⁸ Ali felt that this rule was superfluous, noting that the local Hindu men were unlikely to consort with women outside of their own caste due to their own religious principles. Without any further explanation, Ali considers Tamerlane’s influence as the sole reason that upper-class Muslim women were restricted from the company of men who were not relatives.

Ali went on to describe how women in the *zenana* traveled in cloth *palanquins* to maintain their seclusion while in transit. Unlike *purdah*, Ali did not consider the *palanquin* to be a civilized mode of transportation for women. She disagreed with the use of *palanquins* not

⁷⁷Ali, 317.

⁷⁸Ali, 318.

because of the stifling seclusion of the women inside but because a dozen men were required to bear the weight of the *palanquin*, often for hundreds of miles at a time. However she claims the origin of the practice came from Hindu tradition, by saying that “Hindoos should have been the first to degrade human nature, by compelling them to bear the burden of their fellow creatures.”⁷⁹ Ali’s disgust from the practice arises from the physical strain it places on the bearers, a practice which she claimed must have arisen from Hindu tradition. Ali departed from the narrative established by Orientalists, which claimed that Muslim culture introduced barbaric practices to Hindu society. Ali instead blames Hindu society for such a “degrading” practice, even though her assertion is without evidence.

Ali’s decade-long residence in her husband’s household meant that she had great insight into the relationship dynamics and day-to-day experiences of the women who lived in the *zenana*. However, Ali’s experience in the *zenana* was not entirely authentic since she was allowed certain privileges that other women in the family did not have. Many other British women characterized life in the *zenana* as monotonous and its inhabitants as ignorant. Ali’s “observations” about life in the *zenana* emphasized the positive aspects, such as the women’s intimate companionship with one another and separation from worldly temptation. She admitted that women in the *zenana* were sheltered and uneducated compared to English women, but that they might themselves also feel that the English lifestyle is unappealing for their own reasons. Although Ali did not experience strict seclusion, her depiction of life in the *zenana* starkly contrasted the negative portrayal presented by other women travel writers.

⁷⁹Ali, 320.

The Reaction to *Observations on the Mussulmauns* in the British Press

Observations on the Mussulmauns of Northern India was intellectually significant because it quickly became a revered and trusted source of information about Islam in India throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although initially it was reviewed as if it were another travelogue, it became popular amongst academics and casual readers alike. However, certain intellectuals questioned her account since she refuted many stereotypes that were pervasive in colonial literature. Some Orientalists did not criticize specific points in her book but instead tried to discredit her by asserting that she did speak the language; therefore she could not present a faithful description of the culture. However, this contingent was in the minority since many academics cited her book as a reputable academic source well into the mid twentieth century.

Initial reviews portrayed *Observations on the Mussulmauns* to be a particularly insightful look into the lives of the “natives” in northern India. *The Athenaeum*, a London-printed journal about literature and science, stated that “[Ali’s] opportunities of observation... all inquirers have hitherto been panting for,” and praised her for “furnishing more than all that has hitherto been begged, borrowed, or stolen on the subject.”⁸⁰ *The Calcutta Review* held her book in a similarly high esteem, saying “we consider her trustworthy, and as such recommend her not only to readers at home, but to the hundreds who live in India, as ignorant of the domestic life of those around them.”⁸¹ Dozens of other literary magazines reviewed *Observations on the Mussulmauns*, all echoing similar sentiments expressed in *the Athenaeum* and *the Calcutta Review*, all praising

⁸⁰ “Reviews: *Observation on the Mussulmauns of Northern India: Descriptive of their Manners, Customs, and Habits by Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali*,” *The Athenaeum : London Literary and Critical Journal*, January 21, 1832, 42.

⁸¹ “Reviews of *Observation on the Mussulmauns of Northern India: Descriptive of their Manners, Customs, and Habits by Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali*,” *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. 1, May 1844, 386.

Ali for her insight into certain aspects of life that other travelogues were unable to capture. One literary review magazine considered *Observations on the Mussulmauns* to be the premier example of what an informative travelogue should be, and compared other travelogues to Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's book.⁸² None of the magazines commented on the peculiarity of her situation (a British woman married to a Muslim South Asian man) other than saying that her circumstances bolstered her authority particularly on the subjects of female seclusion and religion.

Observations on the Mussulmauns maintained a presence in British literature in a wide variety of genres throughout the nineteenth century. Extensive quotations and sections were reprinted in everything from missionary guidebooks to books containing "approved readings adapted to the formation of a character of women." Missionary guidebooks found Ali's book to be helpful because it provided in-depth information about specific religious events that were previously unknown to the British public.⁸³ *Observations on the Mussulmauns* also explained Muslim beliefs by comparing certain practices to (what Ali thought) were analogous Christian practices. In the journal *The Foreign Missionary*, an article discussed verses in the Qur'an that refer to customary deathbed practices and how they related to verses in the Bible according to *Observations on the Mussulmauns*.⁸⁴ Ali's intention in comparing Muslim beliefs to Christian traditions was to explain Islam to her British Protestant audience, but missionaries used this information to evangelize more effectively to Muslims. A snippet of Ali's discussion about the values of marriage in India was even included in *My Daughter's Book: Containing a Selection of*

⁸² "Review of Mrs. Poole's *Englishwoman in Egypt*," Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine, Vol. 57, 1845, 287.

⁸³ J. Patterson, "The Festival of the Bera, or the Illuminated Raft," in *the Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, Vol. 20, 1842, 134.

⁸⁴ "Customs of Mohammedans in India: Relating to Dying and the Dead," *The Foreign Missionary*, Vol. 13, 1854, 299.

Approved Readings in Literature, Science, and Art.⁸⁵ The information in *Observations on the Mussulmauns* appealed to nearly every section of English society, from the casual readers to the missionizing Evangelicals.

Although early reviewers portrayed Ali's book as an informative travelogue, it was treated as an academic source immediately after its publication in 1832. *Qanoon-e-Islam* by Ja'far Sharif was heralded as an essential resource pertaining to Islam in early nineteenth-century Britain.⁸⁶ Authored by an Indian man but translated into English by a Briton, it provided thorough theological discussion about Islam and was published a year after *Observations on the Mussulmauns*. The translator, Geoffrey Herklots, added an appendix to the volume where he mentioned that Sharif failed to mention certain customs that were "mentioned by Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali in her very accurate 'Observations on the Mussulmauns of India,' which seems to have been overlooked by the author."⁸⁷ Herklots also mentioned *Observations on the Mussulmauns* in the introduction, where he cited it as being equal in importance to another book on Indian culture produced by celebrated French Orientalist Garcin de Tassy.⁸⁸ Ali did not have the same academic background as an Orientalist yet her book was incredibly popular and considered to be very insightful.

Later academics also considered *Observations on the Mussulmauns* to be a valuable resource about Muslim life in South Asia. Historian William Knighton included numerous references to Ali's volume in his history of Oude, the district of which Lucknow is the capital

⁸⁵ *My Daughter's Book: Containing a Selection of Approved Readings in Literature, Science, and Art*, [unknown editor] (London: Baldwin and Craddock, 1834), 67.

⁸⁶ "Qanoon-e-Islam," *The Athenaeum: London Literary and Critical Journal*, January 1833, 895.

⁸⁷ Ja'far Sharif, ed. G. A. Herklots, *Qanoon-e-Islam: Or, The Customs of the Moosulmans of India*, (London: Parbury, Allen, and Co., 1833), 427.

⁸⁸ Sharif, xiv.

city.⁸⁹ Ali's "judiciousness" in her observations was praised William Cooke Taylor in *the History of Mohammedanism and its Sects*.⁹⁰ After being reprinted by the Oxford University Press in the early twentieth century, the journal *the Nation* stated that the *Observations on the Mussulmauns* was "increasingly valuable" because it revealed "knowledge of the structure of Oriental society in the early stages of [British] social and economic contact."⁹¹ Even recent publications from the last fifty years cite her book for its detailed information about Islam in India.⁹² Although *Observations on the Mussulmauns* is nearly two centuries old, Ali's insight into daily life in northern India remains relevant and interesting to modern academics.

Observations on the Mussulmaun was not left entirely unscathed by criticism. William Crooke, who thought well enough of Ali to write the introduction of the reprint, stated that Ali's weakness was her inability to "speak little more than a broken patois, knew little of grammar, and was probably unable to read or write the Arabic character."⁹³ Although Crooke was an anthropologist (and not an Indologist or Orientalist), the fact that his criticism arose from her lack of linguistic proficiency demonstrates that he agreed with the old notion that a true Orientalist submersed themselves in local culture and language, and that local culture could only be understood if one was fluent in the local language.⁹⁴ However, his criticism has little merit as Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali stated herself that she was "an English lady who could explain herself in their language [Hindustani] without embarrassment."⁹⁵ Ali's book also contained hundreds of

⁸⁹ William Knighton, *The Private Life of an Eastern King* (London: Hope and Co, 1855), 135, 178, 183, 257, 290.

⁹⁰ William Cooke Taylor, *The History of Mohammedanism and Its Sects: Derived Chiefly from Oriental Sources* (London: J.W. Parker, 1834), 107.

⁹¹ "Untitled Review," *the Nation*, January 1, 1918, 152.

⁹² See Cora Vreede-de Stuers, *Parda. A Study of Muslim Women's Life in Northern India* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1968), Murray Thurston Titus, *Islam in India and Pakistan: A Religious History of Islam in India and Pakistan* (Calcutta: Y. M. C. A. Publ. House, 1959), and H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1953).

⁹³ Ali, xvi.

⁹⁴ Trautmann, xx.

⁹⁵ Ali, 157.

Hindustani words transliterated into roman characters, including words that describe very specific professions and pastimes. Crooke's critique is baseless because Ali's inclusion of local vernacular and her ability to speak Hindustani with acquaintances proves that she was able to speak more than a "broken patois."

Observations on the Mussulmauns left a lasting impact on popular and academic colonial literature. Popular literary journals lauded Ali's interesting insight into the lives of Muslims in India. Missionaries used her book because of its richly detailed information about Islam and how it relates to Christianity. Intellectuals used her text to understand Indians' private day-to-day lives in a contemporary and later, historical context. Though she was criticized for her lack of prior knowledge before her dozen-year residency in India, most reviewers praised her detailed observations and empathetic disposition. Although Ali did not directly participate in the Orientalist discourse, she influenced the discourse of colonial knowledge by countering most of the assertions furthered by famed Orientalists and Utilitarians of the late eighteenth century. Though Ali did not consider her writing to be strictly academic, she did consciously attempt to reform the reputation of Muslims by revealing their true religious values and cultural practices, rather than the sensationalized histories and descriptions conveyed by British academics.

Conclusion

At first glance, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of Northern India* appeared to be another travelogue written by an educated, but relatively sheltered upper-class British woman. Ali wrote the book after living in Lucknow for twelve years with her East India Company-employed husband. While living there, Ali learned about the foundations of Islam and experienced the culture firsthand. Ali found that her experiences of Islam and Muslim society did not match the negative preconceived notions she had developed growing up in her native England. After returning home, she wrote *Observations of the Mussulmauns* to shed light on her own experience and correct some of the incorrect stereotypes that were present in British society about South Asians.

Although Ali lived with her husband's family for over ten years and learned many things during her stay, her experience was not entirely authentic. *Observations on the Mussulmauns* contains a lengthy description of life in the *zenana*, but Ali herself was not expected to stay in behind the *purdah* as strictly as her other female in-laws were. Ali also remained vehemently Christian while actively participating in major Muslim celebrations, such as *Muharram* and *Ramzan*. Because of this, Ali's English upbringing deeply influenced her perspective. Even so, living in Lucknow long-term gave Ali insight into the lifestyle of upper-class Muslim society that had never before been published in travelogues or academic volumes. *Observations on the Mussulmauns* became a popular book amongst casual readers, who praised Ali's understanding of Muslim society and candor when discussing it. Academic readers appreciated Ali's attention to detail and knowledge of subjects that were even unknown to Orientalist scholars. Although Ali did not consciously seek to change the mainstream narratives present in the early nineteenth-

century Orientalist discourse, her book managed to help form perceptions of Islam in South Asia well into the twentieth century.

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