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Atiya: The most iconoclastic of the Fyzee sisters

by [Md. Mahmudul Hasan](#) on July 1, 2020 in [Research](#)

In a posthumously published article titled “India: A ‘nation-state’ or ‘civilisation-state’?” (2002), historian Ravinder Kumar (1933-2001) of Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, states that some of the most prominent families of nineteenth-century British India were “the Ranades, the Mehtas, the Dutts [and] the Tyabjis”.

The Tyabjis originally came from Gujarat and settled in Bombay (Mumbai) where they rose to prominence through trade and connections within India and beyond. They actively participated in founding the Indian National Congress that started its journey from Bombay in 1885. Often with considerable influence within the party, they contributed to devising its strategies and policies, and thus played a central role in the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. Importantly, one of them, Badruddin Tyabji (1844-1906) was “the first Indian admitted to the bar” and the third president of the Congress. The Fyzee family was a branch of the extended Tyabji clan.

Writer Atiya Fyzee (1877-1967) belonged to this illustrious family tree, and Badruddin Tyabji was her maternal great uncle. She was a great traveller and an iconoclastic woman worthy of note in the history of South Asian literature. Atiya was older than Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) by 3 years, but had a longer lifespan. Like Rokeya, she was a passionate advocate of female education; and, unlike Rokeya, she travelled extensively in the region and beyond.

[In 1906-07, she was in London to study teacher training at Maria Grey College, which is now part of Brunel University.](#) She started her journey from Bombay to Edwardian London by sea and saw many important places in several countries en route to the UK. In 1908, still unmarried, she went to Britain again with her younger sister Nazli (1874-1968) and her husband. She also travelled to other European and non-European destinations, including China, Japan and the Americas at a time when air travel was an uncommon or infrequent activity, more so for women than for men.



Atiya Fyzee (second from left in the front row) at Maria Grey College.

In 1898, writer and publisher Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935) and his wife journalist Muhammadi Begum (1878-1908) founded the weekly women's magazine *Tahzib un-Niswan* (Women's Culture) in Lahore. Muhammadi Begum had the renown of influencing and supporting many women writers, including Atiya. She persuaded Atiya to record her experiences in Britain and share those with readers of *Tahzib un-Niswan*.

Accordingly, during her 1906-07 stay in London, Atiya kept a roznamcha (diary) and regularly sent her diary entries to her sisters Zehra (1866-1940) and Nazli. The elder sister Zehra did the initial screening and editing, and passed the entries to Muhammadi Begum who, after making editorial changes, printed them in *Tahzib un-Niswan* in instalments. The series published in *Tahzib un-Niswan* instantly earned Atiya fame in her native land and among the South Asian diaspora in Britain. In 1921, the Agra-based press Matba-i-Mufid-i-Am published these travel diaries in book form under the title of *Zamana-i-Tahsil* in addition to two titles by Zehra.

Although Atiya wrote most of her other writings in English, considering the linguistic comfort of the audience of *Tahzib un-Niswan*, she wrote *Zamana-i-Tahsil* in Urdu. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Sunil Sharma translated the travelogue into English under the title of "A Time of Education" and included it in *Atiya's Journeys: A Muslim Woman from Colonial Bombay to Edwardian Britain* (2010).

All the three Fyzee sisters – Zehra, Atiya and Nazli – had a modern education and visited Europe and were involved in establishing Anjumani-Khawatin-i-Islam (Islamic sisters' association) in Aligarh in 1914 (Rokeya founded its Calcutta branch in 1916). They wrote books and contributed to various periodicals. Zehra took an editorial role and, besides preparing Atiya's diary entries for publication, edited Nazli's travelogue *Sair-i-Yurop* (Travel to Europe), which Sunil Sharma has now partly translated into English. She edited, and arranged the publication of, their mother Amirunnisa Fyzee's poetry books, *Yadgari-Amira* and *Amin*.

As the Stephen children produced the family newspaper *Hyde Park Gate News* (1891-95) in late nineteenth-century London, members of the Tyabji clan kept notebooks under the title of *Kitab-i-Akhbar-i-Kihim-Yali* (news book of Yali at Kihim). This suggests that, like their counterparts in the Stephen family, many members of the Fyzee family and of the extended Tyabji clan were writers.



Atiya was unconventional and “unorthodox” in her behaviour in more than one sense. At a time when female education was at best rudimentary and at worst scorned and ridiculed, or in many cases discouraged or restricted to the home, she made a transcontinental trip for educational purposes at the age of 29 and unmarried. As mentioned before, she travelled extensively within the borders of South Asia and across the globe at a time when transnational journeys were not a smooth or easy affair, especially for women.

Again, at a time when women in India were largely confined to domestic spaces, Atiya participated in public life unveiled. In “Coming Out: Decisions to Leave Purdah” (1996), Gail Minault cites an incident that happened during the annual Muslim Educational Conference in Aligarh in 1925. While most Muslim women participated in the Conference properly veiled and separated from men, Atiya ascended the podium unveiled to give a powerful speech (before both men and women) demanding equal rights for women; and that, despite the disapproval of the Secretary of the Conference the influential Nawab Sadar Yar Jung Habibur Rahman Khan Sherwani (1867-1950).

More importantly, in early twentieth-century South Asia, most girls were married at puberty (and often before) to men who were considerably older, while most boys remained single longer. For instance, Atiya’s junior contemporary Shahbano Begum

Maimoona Sultan (1900-1982) was married at five, and the marriage was consummated when she reached 12 years of age. Maimoona travelled to Britain with her mother-in-law Begum of Bhopal Nawab Sultan Jahan (1858-1930) in 1911. At the age of 13, she published *Siyasat-i-Sultani* (1913) which G. B. Baksh translated into English under the title of *A Trip to Europe* (1914).

Although at that time 12 was the “age of consent” at which sexual intercourse could begin, as Geraldine Forbes mentions in “Women and modernity: The issue of child marriage in India” (1979), “marriages could be arranged and performed without any age restriction”. Atiya’s sister Nazli was married at 12 to a much older man to be his second wife. This shocked Atiya deeply and prompted her to choose a different life path.

It is perhaps important to mention here that child marriage and age disparity in marriage were prevalent not only among the Muslims but also among other religious communities in British India. For example, in 1883, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) married Mrinalini Devi (1873-1902) when the groom was 22 and the bride, 9 years old.

Geraldine Forbes mentions a report of September 1929 that states that “48.4 per cent of all Hindu females” and “37.01 per cent of all Muslim females” in India “were married before they reached age 15 ... and that consummation occurred soon after marriage with no thought for the fitness of the girl.” Forbes recounts a sad story that, in 1890, a Hindu wife named Phulmoni Das (aged 10) “died of injuries resulting from sexual intercourse with her 35 year-old-husband” by the name of Hurry Mohun Maitee.

Despite the widespread practice of early marriage of girls, Atiya remained unmarried until age 35 when she wedded the writer and artist Samuel Rahamin (1880-1964) of Jewish origin. While most husbands were much older than their wives, Samuel was younger than Atiya by three years. He converted to Islam before marrying Atiya. This matrimonial union was unconventional because, in early twentieth-century South Asia and somewhat globally, inter-ethnic/intercultural marriage was considered an aberration and socially unacceptable.

The Fyzee sisters were ahead of their time in their views and ways of life. However, given the unconventionality, unique personality and independence of spirit, Atiya was the most iconoclastic of them all.

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