CHAPTER-3
ENTRY INTO ZENANAS: MISSIONARY ENCOUNTERS WITH INDIGENOUS WOMEN

The image of the zenana always produced curiosity in the minds of the western travelers and missionaries alike. It constructed a sense of fascination for the former and a reforming zeal for the latter. As mentioned in the earlier chapter the justification of the women’s presence in the missionary field started with the zenana visitation and in the process different modes of perception of the Indian women emerged. Not only this, such encounters were even used as an opportunity to confirm one’s own ideology. Going by the amount of literature written on the zenana visits, one can assume that this led to an important part of the missionary and Indian experience. Much has been written on the institution of purdah that have generalised its very ideology. The closest in this context comes from Eunice De’ Souza’s “Purdah, An Anthology”, has a collection of primary accounts of travellers and missionaries’ on the zenanas.¹ Such narratives provide an essential background on the formation of the stereotypical lines of a westernized approach scripted of the zenanas.

Missionaries tend to make visits in the households in the name of reform to women who were living in a general degraded position responsible for the decay of the indigenous society. In this chapter, I shall be writing about the women travelers along

with the missionary intervention, as both liberally conceptualized the zenanas in their discourses. The zenanas became the “contact zones” for both.

I tried to emphasize on the Bible women in my chapter along with evangelism as their part largely gets ignored while talking about the evangelistic aspect of the missionary work. In a way the bible women provided access to homes that women missionaries might not otherwise have gained. The Bible women would create a closer bond between the native women and the western ways, so the latter believed.

In analyzing the meaning of zenana entry I argue that the discourses generated within were gender power for women. They exercised control over private places that shaped an autonomous identity for them.

**Missionaries and Travelers: Viewing the ’Other’**

While reading the descriptions one tends to see a repetition of the zenana encounters, yet they were the most sought after stories of the travellers and the missionary records. This key section covers the various voices of the visitors in the zenanas. Hopefully, the variety of responses in this section will do something to throw light on these accounts that treat them as if they spoke in one voice. For Mary Billington did not have a conventional approach of what I would call a ‘missionary perception’ towards the zenanas. Journalists like Mary Frances Billington came to India during the 1890’s had a conservative outlook. For her Indian womanhood served an example at home for the emancipated feminists. As such her accounts move to
and fro from the traditional Indian woman to the not-so-docile woman exposed to new reforms of widow remarriage, education etc. She defends the woman of the East when she states that the latter by no means ".... fades from view. A cypher of man's changeless sum of lust past, present, and to come". For she found life in the zenanas simply rather dull, rather prosaic, with few distinctive features of romance, hardship or heroism about it.2 Though formally adhering to the restrictions of the purdah, Mary Billington saw it more as a survival in idea of the "protection men gave to their women folk against his neighbours". 3 Interestingly, Billington widens the notion of the reader on the subject of the Indian women, who she felt would stand at par with the women of the west, if the zenana restrictions were withdrawn. Such statements came rare.

Mary Carpenter made a trip as a traveler as early as 1868 and wrote her work in two volumes. In her books, the Christian fervor was strongly visible – "We see the heathenism assuming a daring front in the midst of Christian civilization."4 Zenanas were the most attention – seeking areas that demanded "immediate cleanliness." However, Carpenter was sure that "intercourse with Europeans will lead to a desire to change the condition of such unhealthy abodes, and feel the justice of no longer secluding the most delicate part of the species, to whom home is everything, in the worst part of the mansion."5

2 Mary Frances Billington, Woman in India (New Delhi: Amarko Book Agency. 1973, Introduction.)
3 Ibid p. 122.
4 Mary Carpenter, Six months in India (London: Longman Green and Do. 1868. p. 195).
5 Ibid p. 63
There was no dearth of accounts that enormously influenced in shaping the future travellers’ reaction to India. Many writings fashioned an image of purdah that deprived women living in it of all the basic needs, be it even medical. Kathleen Olga Vaughan who would not fall in the category of travellers was doctor by profession in the Zenana hospital in Srinagar. The reason her book finds a place here is because it talks of disease and the zenana living simultaneously. She talks of osteomalacia on women deprived of sunlight. A look at the journal from Marchioness of Dufferin gives an idea of her visits to zenana in terms of the plight of the Indian women who could not be examined by male doctors. The memories of the women travelers that threw light on social India, strongly centered around the Indian woman. Popular interest was shown among the missionary readers. J.K.H. Denny represents her views as a history of work for the women in India done by women from England. Zenana visiting she calls “was a most hopeful way of reaching native ladies” and the wish to do this is strongly reflected in her book, through the ‘personal influence’ of the missionaries. In a way, the circulation of these writings simultaneously helped the western women to take active part in the Church to “Christianize the heathen.” Inevitably, the voices of the women missionaries appeared, somewhat on the same lines as the travelers. But interestingly, the indigenous response and the cross-cultural scenario varied in the texts that followed.

6 Kathleen Olga Vaughan, *The Purdah system and its Effect on Motherhood: Osteomalacia caused by absence of light in India* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1928.)
By contrast with the missionary women, these women travelers spent a short span of time in India. But both tended to fall into stereotypical pattern of zenana description. Mid 19th century literature saw the revelations of the most hidden accounts that quenched the inquisitiveness of the readers of the West.

Mrs. Marcus Fuller an American missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in India wrote a series of articles on the wrongs of Indian womanhood in a weekly newspaper that were later compiled in a book. Yet another work that is based on selection. And this selection consciously shapes the perception of the “other”. She writes, “But it is said that women are contented in their seclusion. This is true. So is the canary, that was born in the cage and never tasted the sweets of the free air.” All these writings were meant for a particular home audience having similar assumptions and opinions. Rose Greenfield simply put up ‘Zan’ a woman, is just the name given to the women’s apartment in a Mohammedan house and zenana work is teaching the women in their homes. The work of the zenana worker had to be defined, as now the process represented the women of the church. She was primarily a teacher, in the truest sense a personal friend to her pupils, counselor, a sympathizer, a comforter and to some extent

10 M. Rose Greenfield, *Five years in Ludhiana or Work amongst Indian Sisters* (London: S.W. Patridge & Co., Edinburgh, 1886, p. 28.)
a doctor, using such homely remedies as the knows of and even, sometimes a nurse."11

This overwhelming preoccupation with the zenanas in the colonial context took form of several narratives that attached inordinate cultural importance attached to it. Both the women travellers and the missionaries have been largely pro-British in its constructs. But even in its overall valorised texting, there is a moment of fissure in the text when the western perception, very briefly, subjected to a submissive native gaze. It needs however to be pointed out here that despite these lopsided narratives, they should not be read as entirely divorced from the native perception.

**Initial Phase**

Caution' had to be used for the initial visit. When in 1854, Mrs. Sale, one of the earlier Baptist Zenana Missionary, gained admittance in a ladies apartment for the first time, she had to keep a low-key approach to gain acceptance in the household. “I entered a large room where there were several women they all seemed startled.......... They had never seen a white face before .......... After a while I asked them if they would not like to read”.12 Teaching the women to read was the most promising task to sustain a visit in the zenana. Simultaneously this led to the opening of zenana schools, where ladies of the neighbourhood were taught by a missionary woman. The credit to establish one of the initial zenana schools goes to Mrs. Sale.  

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12 A Tableau to be presented in celebration of the centenary of the founding of the Baptist Zenana Mission. ‘1854-Entry into the Zenana, n.d.
who did the work in two houses. Her scholars consisted of several grown women, wives, mothers, daughters, "they were taught to read and write Bengalee and to knit in wool and crochet."¹³ Within the prevailing paradigm of the zenanas, the women missionary offered multiple activities for the confined women. Although zenana teaching did not prove so productive, however it did provide a breakthrough as a perfect educational setting in the form of schools run by the missionaries. In 1861, The Indian Normal School and Instruction Society was formed in London to cooperate with the ladies in Calcutta and in 1862 sent out ladies for the zenana work.¹⁴ In a quarter of a century from that day, nearly all the women’s boards and societies especially engaged in work for women were formed and zenana instruction became a part of the work of almost every mission. The number of mission schools remained modest. In 1876, the Presbyterian Church, USA had 23 schools with 619 students where as in 1888 the Z.B.M.M. had 68 schools and institutions with 3,739 pupils. Although the numbers remained small yet these schools were a major part of zenana activity. With the arrival of women missionaries almost every mission station had a recognized girls school. ¹⁵ The Church of England Zenana Society had two girls' school in Batala in 1914. The number of pupils, it proudly claimed was 120, as against 69 in 1891.¹⁶

Though the missionaries illustrated the numbers yet it was not always easy to bring girls' students to the classes. Rev.

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¹³ Report of the Conference held at Lahore, December and Jan. 1862-63 p. 64.
¹⁵ John Webster, The Christian Community and Change in the 19th Century North India ( New Delhi: Macmillan, 1976, p. 143.)
Golukhnath of the American Presbyterian Missionary at Jullundur, found it extremely “difficult to persuade the people to send their daughter to our schools......... hence we must carry out work at once into the zenanas.”17 In a way, having accepted the zenana as a valid arena of activity, the missionaries instead of challenging it, legitimated and reinforced the seclusion of women through their extensive use of zenana visiting.18

Glimpses of the early work by the zenana missionaries came through various other initiatives. “Sewing school” to help poor widows were opened by many missionary women. Garments made here were sold in the nearby village.19 Hence, bracketing the activity as “charitable”. Similar needlework was carried enthusiastically in the zenanas by the indigenous women too. Here a discrepancy was visible in the attitudes of the western women. While the missionaries described it as extension of the western tastes, for women like Mary Billington the activity came as display of ‘vulgar showiness’ of the western look. “When I saw that display, however I did not grasp what I have seen, and that is , that in no branch of Indian art has British influence been so mischievously detrimental as in needlecraft.” 20 She held the missionaries responsible for passing the western woolwork to the natives, who had adopted and perpetrated it in the “vilest form”.

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17 Report of the Conference held at Lahore, December and January, 1862-63 p. 120.
What came to be seen here was a plurality of voices with varied gaze for a similar framework. Indian women's voice, too largely reflected ambivalent response. In some instances zenana women went to considerable lengths to show their enjoyment towards missionary visits, "Do you know ma'am that I really never sleep. I have so much to do with reading and wool work, besides my house-duties, that I am always busy now."21 There were some who cried "You come too seldom. What can I learn in one or two lessons a week?" 22 One would assume that over enthusiasm too was dealt cautiously. Three lessons in a week were planned for such pupils, while bible teaching was taught on consecutive days.23 Whereas, in several cases where marked interest had been shown by a pupil reported Miss C.R. Clark, from Ludhiana "I have been suddenly asked to discontinue my visits, and in one case had the door rudely shut in my face when venturing to make friendly inquiry about my pupils of former days."24 Nevertheless for the missionary women, the attitude was welcoming where the native woman was "being better able to understand and be understood." How much did the understanding exist between the two? The writings reveal no simple equation between the two: the definition of the 'self' and the 'other' depends on whose gaze is it. I wish to point out that the plurality of encounters put across in the texts made the zenana construction a contradictory process.

23 Ibid
The indigenous women declared their affection for the missionary women in many ways that showed samples of acceptance of the recipients. Miss Fuller in 1884 opened a new mission station at Ferozepur, passed away very suddenly from internal injuries caused by a fall. One of her pupils said “We did not mourn of our own father and mother as deeply as we mouth for her.” 25 Despite the diversity of the encounters, much was based on the degree of dependency of the Indian woman on the missionary woman. Within the various arenas, it was education that gave assurance to the natives to rely on the missionaries. “We have no quarrel with zenana missions”, said a Hindu lady speaking in London, “but for zenana missionaries the secluded women of India got their only education that way.’ 26

There were reports of strong contrasts in the religious background of the indigenous women. Ms. Emma Fuller in 1868, visited twenty four houses, out of which eighteen, were Mohammedan.27 Missionaries regarded these comparisons as a raw material and preface to the zenana work. “The life of a Punjabi woman comes as a pleasant surprise..... Just the opposite of the zenana woman, who is accustomed to sit with folded hands......”28 At any rate regardless of these variations the missionaries probably claimed access to households of both, Hindu and Mohammedan zenanas. By framing such visits, the credibility of the women missionaries increased. Yet, things didn’t always go as accepted by the zenana missionary.

25 J K.H. Denny, Toward the Sunrising, p.80.)
26 EA5:51 The emergence of CEMZS.
27 J K.H. Denny, Toward the Sunrising, p. 77.
Missionaries were quick to count the numbers related to zenana work, small though it would seem. In 1877 there were 25 zenana missionaries in North India; Punjab itself had 7. Reporting from Ludhiana, Rose Greenfield accounted a marked increase within five years before 1884-14 houses to 99, and from about 37 pupils to 335.

At every point of the missionary discourse, variations were added, giving different images of the zenanas to the readers. By doing so, the women missionaries believed that they would open the features of social and cultural reality they were encountering. Cultural practices, like idleness and disorderly lifestyle became the stereotype Indian Woman.

But in a Mohammedan house there was no neatness. In one corner cooking would be going on, accompanied by blinding smoke, cocks and hens, ducks and goats added to the confusion. When the despairing missionary rose to drive them away, then squeals and cries only make matters worse. No wonder that books were torn or lost, ink dry, pencils no where to be found, pens broken.

On the contrary, to all the chaos found in the zenanas, the women missionaries made a distinct effort to make her visit

30 Rose Greenfield, Five Years in Ludhiana or Work Amongst our Indian p. 37.
31 J.K.H. Denny, Toward the Satirising. p. 78.
perfect and crisp. And to her surprise, some zenana women attached great importance to the etiquettes of the visitor, who at times happened to be an Indian woman who was employed by the missionary. Here, it was evidently found that the indigenous convert's success to an extend depended on the mannerisms she presented. On this, Mrs. Winter had to report that she sent a native Christian daily to a Hindu family but unfortunately her manners offended them to such that they declined her service.  

Hence attempts were made to remove such objections. Suggestions came in the Punjab Conference in 1882 for the preparation of a manual that would provide the directions of the Zenana work and conduct especially for the use of Indian assistants. Since it was considered to exercise a steady influence on the heathen women, missionaries used persuasive powers when confronted with refusal.

The Bible Woman: Making of the Indigenous Christian Worker.

Missionaries visiting zenanas attempted to effect the social scenario, resulting in the emergence of the “heathen” women as the new indigenous Christians. From poor or out caste backgrounds, the native Christian women entered into the mission field as employees. These women accepted Christianity in a flexible manner. They remained the traditional Indian woman in appearance and custom but at times adopted western names. “Not the figure which rises to our minds eye at the mention of the name. With a black bonnet and a long cloak and

32 The Women of India and What Can be Done for Them (Madras:Christian Literature Society, 1895, p. 49.)
33 Ibid p. 51.
a bag, but a dark-skinned little woman with large mild eyes and smooth black hair, swathed in a white sari or chaddar.”

The vulnerable victim suffering the cruelty of her husband and mother-in-law were the principle molders as Bible-women. It was their lives that expressed the “brighter and happier days” when acquainted with Christianity. They became driving force for further conversion. “It was a great joy to Maryam to see seven of her own immediate relatives converted and baptised.”

Initially she accompanied the missionary ‘memsahib’ in zenana visitation and read the Bible to the women of the house, she had to memorise the verses of scriptures, which were to be shared at the visitations followed by the singing of the bhajans. The field gradually opened for the indigenous women who were matured by the missionaries during their zenana visits as teachers. The Bible woman promoted the women’s work in the zenanas. She grew under the Christian influence of the women missionaries. Some of them were usually brought up in the orphanage and educated in the Girls’ Mission High School.

 Soon she acquired an image of an independent woman who was led and taught by the “Holy Spirit” in her work. The emphasis of the Bible woman’s presence was elicited by the response of the people she visited. “One of the young women who came to the women’s home last year was brought by the Bible women she met with her in the zenanas which she visited.”

34 Ibid p.240.
35 Ibid. p.245.
37 Bible Women’s Work, Mrs. Stursbey, Women’s Work, North India, 1902.
38 Ibid.
It appeared that the Bible woman became highly efficient and demonstrated her professional skills in many ways.

In 1863, Martha, the Bible woman, had ten women under daily instruction. The early morning home she gave to visiting, and in her dhooli, going from place to place, she snatched a few minutes to study her Bible. Her simple skills in medicine and nursing was much appreciated and the kind, self denying, pure, truthful life in a Christian family made a great impression on the people round, being so unlike their own.39

During itineration work the bible women became crowd pullers, people left their work to listen to the bhajans sung by the bible women. In 1919, the CEZMS record showed the number of Bible women were far more than the western missionaries themselves, Bible women-256, Zenana teachers-42, Zenana households visited 8,658.40 This ‘success’ was seen as a personal accomplishment of the missionary. For them, the Bible women were sub-ordinates, trained and shaped as professionals. The emphasis of going out together brought forth a sense of accomplishment. “We have sold a good number of gospels and hymnbooks and given away plenty of tracts and are

39 J K.H. Denny, Toward the Sunrising, pp. 76-77.
praying that the harvest will come."41 In 1881, Ms. Andrews opened a small Mohammedan school taught a Mohammedan girl named Rahmat Begum, and that has continued in existence till 1886.42 These women found full time employment in evangelistic work who were looked after by the mission society they belonged to.43 The native Christian women ‘employees’ and the missionary women worked as a team and the latter were aware that they could never by themselves reach the women in a country as diverse as India.

Furthermore, these techniques of employment of indigenous women became an integral component of evangelism. The self employed converts acquired the image of a powerful practitioner who functioned in a Christian set up. In doing so, along with the missionaries, the women converts too presented to the public an alternative ideal of Indian womanhood.

The Bible women became sensitive to the needs of the missionary women. The understandings of the indigenous women led to various beginnings and particular ways of working adapted to these settings. The making of the Bible women itself is an example that built an important bridge between the western women missionaries and the native women. As pointed out by Geoffrey Burkhart, the Bible woman was an invention well-suited to the circumstances women missionaries found in the early days of their work.44

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41 Rose Greenfield, *Five Years in Ludhiana or work amongst our Indian sisters*, p.32
42 Ibid.
43 *Bible Woman’s Work*, 1902, North India Beldanga, Women’s Work.
Impression and Image: Sketch of the 'husband'

Comparatively the aggressiveness of the 'women's work' was witnessed more in the zenana school work but the key focus of the early missionary work still remained on the zenanas itself. Central to the set of discourse that under mined the missionary woman's work was the figure of the husband – described as the sole authority for zenana visitations. It was, thus, not unusual when matters regarding penetration of western thought was decided by him. Zenana visitation without the permission of the husband was highly unlikely. Most missionary women found 'illiteracy' as a cause to fight their way into the forbidden zenanas, for which zenana education was the most powerful tool that legitimized their work. Catch phrases like "Educated men should have educated wives."\textsuperscript{45} were popularised by them to get full cooperation by the male members of the house. Instances of their participation occupied a part of the missionary report. "Many husbands and brothers now ask to be present when their wives and sisters are being instructed."\textsuperscript{46} Such references in itself contradicted the typical image of missionary writing that if the man of the house allowed entry of the missionary women into the households, then he certainly was "progressive" as against the preconceived missionary notion of him being the cause of backwardness for the women of the house.

I would like to draw to the ambivalence within the subjectivities of these women missionary encounters. In

\textsuperscript{45} The Women of India and What Can be Done for Them (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1895 p. 25)

\textsuperscript{46} 'Our work and the workers', General Annual Meeting, held on Apr. 30, 1874, The Indian Female Evangelist Vol. II, July 1874, p. 140.
contrast, to the above stories, the missionaries' writings liberally produced anecdotes that showed the conservative side of the husband. This probably dramatized the missionary effort and moreover it intensified the nature of zenana work. A missionary who at Hissar, on her restrictions to teach the second wife to read, said............. “As her husband, an educated man and an accountant in the canal office, attributed, his first wife's death to her leaving to read.”

Another tiresome pupil when developed a taste for reading made her husband angry, who called his wife a fool. Miss McPhun, the missionary expressed regret at his rudeness but the wife seemed quite content and answered, “Oh Ms. Sahiba, he is very clever .......... he is a pleader and goes to count everyday and wears English clothes?”

How then one is asked, do we read the 'other' in such contradictory accounts. What the missionary did was perhaps stick to the stereotype picture of an Indian husband and his doting wife.

**Missionary Literature: Forming Identities and Perceptions**

The Missionary woman gradually transformed herself into an emphatic observer committed to “elevate” the condition of the heathen women. It was perhaps this “concern” that led to a number of accounts by the zenana missionaries that undermined her position as well as that of whom she came in contact with. The outlook presented in the texts fueled the popular opinion that the uplifting of the social position of the Indian women is one of the most crying needs “....... which requires women of high attainments and wide and

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understanding sympathies.” Broadly, I would classify the texts in two categories. The first one provided a lens through which readers back home saw the “heathen” lands and accordingly shaped their perceptions. The other were the texts mainly published in the heathen lands for the indigenous readers. This was one of the “direct means to proselytise” as Kenneth Jones states through street and bazaar preaching, through the publication and dissemination of religious tracts and journals, and through education remained the major forms of Christian evangelism. Here the missions claimed a direct link between Christianity and a better way of life for the non Christian women. The texts were targeted for zenana visitation and in course of time for readers to know more about the 'true message of Christ.' The necessity for a closer focus in the viewpoints of the missionaries through publishing texts led this chapter to take a look at the published material of various societies. The voices of the indigenous women almost remain silent yet they could not be fully suppressed.

Towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, efforts came for textual production various press units were set up for producing written materials. In a way, these earliest texts were means by which the subjects of the imperialist circle could put forth their thoughts about the ‘colonisers’ and the ‘colonised’. Gareth Griffiths while analyzing the receptive life stories and personal conversion narratives produced from the 1870s to 1920s states that although the voices of the missionized

49 Louise Creighton, Missions: Their Rise and Development (London: Williams and Northgate, nd p. 213)
50 Kenneth Jones, Arya Dharma Hindu Consciousness in 19th century Punjab (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976, p. 9)
"subjects" may seem to have got rather lost in these ventriloquized texts, read against the grain they reveal traces of the converted colonized subject.\textsuperscript{51} Mission texts, like other texts in the colonial languages, could thus be both an instrument of oppression and a means of resistance, depending upon the circumstances of their production.

The Ludhiana Press was established in 1835 and soon produced a stream of tracts, pamphlets, journals in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Persian and Kashmiri. An added asset that came with these publishings was that the missionaries both popularized and standardized the North-Western languages. Within its first 3 years, the Ludhiana Press released 68,000 volumes, while other missionary presses soon added to this stream of polemical literature after 1849.\textsuperscript{52}

Literature between the missionaries and Muslims date as early as the press in the Punjab. The missionaries were publishing a large number of tracts in the vernacular by 1850's. They issued a newspaper, Nur-i-Afsan in 1873. The verbal assault in the early years on Islam as well as other religions was deliberate and organized and was carried on by Rev. Pfander, Rev. Wilson among Europeans and Imam-ud-din and Rajab Ali among the Muslim converts. Among other popular newspapers urging the Muslims to oppose Christianity was Nusrat-ul-Akhbar and Nusrat-ul-Islam.\textsuperscript{53} (Some of the extracts from the

\textsuperscript{51} Gareth Griffiths, 'Trained to tell the Youth: Missionaries, Converts and Narration', in Norman Etherington(ed.), \textit{Mission and Empire} (New York: O.U.P., p. 155.)

\textsuperscript{52} Cited in Kenneth W. Jones, \textit{Arva Dharm Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab.}, New Delhi: Manohar, 1976, p. 8 \textit{Ibid} pp. 75-76.

\textsuperscript{53} W. Eric Gustafson and Kenneth Jones.(eds) \textit{Sources on Punjab History.}, (New Delhi:Manohar,1975,p.296.)
newspapers have been compiled in English and put in various volumes according to its year of publication as Native News Papers-NNP) These tracts undoubtedly helped to form the popular view of Christianity held by Muslims. The activities of missionaries, mission workers, and mission institutions were primary subject matter of all these sources. Makhzan-i-Masihi, The Christian Treasury was a monthly report published by the Allahabad Press in Roman urdu. It covered had various news extracts of missionary events. (I found some, dt April- July 1891, in the library of the Mission School in Kotgarh).

Hindi tracts of similar content were published by the Arya Samaj. Among others “Arya Musafir”, the monthly journal was devoted almost exclusively to polemical statements in defense of Aryan ideology and in condemnation of all other systems of belief. The two earliest Arya journals printed in English, “The Arye” for the years 1882-1883, “and The Arya Patrika”, 1885-1888 give useful information on the workings of Arya Samaj and its confrontation with other religions. Although these texts are not mission texts, yet they being contemporary writings with that of the Christian missionaries, become important documents as they reflect the opinion of the natives. One of the Punjabi texts relevant to these discourses was “Stree”. Though not a mission-document, the monthly magazine discussed various contemporary issues of the Punjabi woman. Somehow such indigenous texts gave voice to their “own” people.

The British and Foreign Bible Society was established at Lahore in 1863, that controlled work from Delhi to Peshawar and from Karachi to the Northern Frontier. It’s object was to print
and circulate the translations of the Holy Scriptures. Colporteurs and Bible women were employed by the Society. In the same year the Punjab Religious Book Society was established. All subscription and donations arising from the Society’s business as book-sellers and stationers were devoted to the publication of vernacular literature. Further effort in the same field came from the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge – the Vernacular Literature Society. The latter society was mainly concerned with the production of literature in connection with the Church of England and carried its book business through the agency of the Punjab Religious Book Society.  

As the in-flow of zenana visits increased, the missionaries felt the need for specific literature to be ministered for such discourses. In the Punjab Ladies Missionary Conference held in 1882, Ms. Greenfield read a paper on 'Educational literature' where the need for suitable books for zenana visits was pointed out. “No sooner does the new comer enter on zenana or school work that the question arises ‘What books shall I use?’ And much of the success of her work will depend on a wise choice.” “Wise choice” included lessons comprising moral and religious teaching, lessons on sanitary arrangement, geography, history, arithmetic and letter writing. In connection to this, one of the earliest zenana reading books published in 1875 in the principal languages of India was by the Christian Vernacular Education Society.  

55 Ibid p.78
56 The Women of India and What can be done for them, p.25
The Christian Literature Society of the Punjab Branch provided literature for Indian readers in the vernacular languages of the Punjab. Number of translatory work was undertaken, separate for Moslem and Hindu readers. It covered diverse subjects ranging from health to training of children. Similar attempts were followed in 1888, when in the Ladies Conference in the same year emphasis was made to prepare series of books for the zenana, which had to be "pervaded by a religious spirit." Despite the strong need shown by the missionaries for raising zenana education, the sale of such literature remained limited. Finally, the visits were based on the missionaries own experience that established a regular zenana visiting schedule.

Very soon, as anticipated, the zenana visiting was a favourite subject for detailed descriptions in women’s missionary journals. These missionary texts were the most effective way for disseminating information among overseas readers and missionaries. Articles especially from 1880-1900 reflect many of the contemporary debates in missionary areas about issues like the women’s entry in the mission societies, and their strong need to reach 'heathen' women. Similarly they also echoed the concerns about the missionary women in the Indian field. "It is important for a woman to know her work thoroughly if she is to be in India than if she intends to practice at home because there is no possibility of calling in further help and the practitioner must be quite independent of expensive medical and surgical

57 The Punjab Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America for the year 1906, (Ludhiana: Ludhiana Mission Steam Press, 1907 p. 18.)
appliances, etc........"58 Besides providing important tips to the aspiring missionaries, the journals covered almost every detail of the zenana work. In 1877, for example, the summary of the operations for North India were given as below. Zenana missionaries – 25, Punjab- 7, number of zenanas visited-32. Such reports, the missionaries believed would provide an impetus for further missionary intervention.

One of the most popular early CMS Periodical was the CMS Gleaner (1841-1921). Reports covered here were comprehensively detailed with pictures. These drawings captured the depiction of the missionary gaze and conveyed a 'complete' picture of 'what they saw'. Sketches, such as, of a closed zenana with sari-clad women cooking in a smoke - filled - room, were self – descriptive. 59

Missionary periodicals from the CEZMS included – Indian Women and China's Daughters, 1880-1939, that later was retiled Looking East at India's Women and China's Daughters 1940-1937. The Indian Female Normal School and Instruction Society published the Indian Female Evangelist from 1872-1881. A more analytical work came from the Zenana Medical and Bible Mission with The Zenana in 1893 till 1935. These journals described the cultural mind-set that the women missionaries brought to their work with women in north India.

The Baptist Zenana Missionary regularly featureć its zenana activity in an annual report Zenana work & Bible Women in India and China. (I could lay my hands on a few BZM Reports

from 1896-97 till 1911-1912). The literature was never self-critical. The main aim was to “make new friends”, who would later be members of their “family”. The passages always ending on an optimistic tone. “It is disappointing when a woman is getting on nicely with her lessons, to find that she must go off to her village... But yet it may be that by this means the Gospel which she has heard and the hymns she has learned get spread, into places otherwise unreached by us.”

Assuming authority and expertise through such texts was easy for missionary writers, as few of their readers were likely to be in a position to challenge their claims. Missionary texts were clearly meant for Church people and mission related people and attracted Christian readership.

Given the title of such textual production, not, surprisingly, the title of journals and other missionary literature were typically focused on the “heathen” woman in need of “redemption”. Pamphlets were widely circulated. Their main purpose being to raise money – a call for philanthropic work. Almost every report ended with a plea for voluntary financial help. In some cases a “form of request was added that not only welcomed monetary help but land or houses too.”

The missionary women remained aggressive in their objective and used literature with the same zeal. As a consequence they made a space for themselves in a male-dominated church setup. Till 1900s the zenana missionary

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literature mostly focused on “heathenism” that gradually dropped from the turn of the century. The dimensions of missionary literature changed, the woman missionary was no longer seen as a mere redeemer but also as a builder of Christian institutions that broadened the horizon of her work.

**Rhetoric – Educating ‘Our Eastern Sisters’**

The characterization of the Indian women became the central figure well towards 1880’s. As discussed earlier in the Chapter, reality was depicted through the missionary gaze that further specified their own nature of work.

The needs of India’s women lie at the very heart of missionary problems in that great land, and unless they are met, the cause of Christianity must suffer defeat. The responsibility lies with us at home to pray and to work, and it may be to go, to these dear sisters who are shut away from the one Time Light.62

Such allusions were to increase the sympathetic understanding of the missionary woman towards her “Indian sisters”. The phrase caught up within the rhetoric frame of the mission work. The call of liberty from their “Indian sisters” seemed the inspiring force that became the concentration for zenana work. “It is therefore necessary, if we would secure the next generation for Christ, that we can get at them at all – homes (if such they may be called) in which our sisters are immured

like caged birds.................” 63 Similar accounts dominated the pages of the missionary reports. Such accounts tell us more about the viewers than about the material realities of the zenana. The ‘gaze’ that is spoken of became compassionate describing the ‘other’ as an object victimized to its surroundings. “As soon as European and American women began to realize something of the conditions under which their sisters in other lands were living, the desire to help and teach them was aroused.” 64 Paradoxically at this moment of time the western women missionaries like their eastern sisters were striving for place in a patriarchal home culture and in the Mission Boards. Hence, what the missionaries saw and wrote was a reflection of the “self” in the “other”.

The image of the Indian woman was constructed within the periphery of the “four walls” she lived. Her existence was static with no scope outside the classification drawn by the missionaries. Ironically, behind all the hue and cry about the zenana system, the position and the survival of the missionary woman in Church depended within the parameters of the zenana. The impetus of the women missionary work depended upon the ‘degradation’ of the zenanas. “The vast circle of Indian womanhood with its pitiful completeness of social degradation, physical miseries and spiritual death is spread out before the missionaries by the Lord. In marked and unmistakable ways He

64 Louise Creighton, Missions: Their Rise and Development, p. 13.
is inviting and pleading with them to arise and take possession of that field for Him."65

To strengthen her position, the woman missionary interfered with the Indian traditional customs. All was done to sympathise with the indigenous woman but with the sense of superiority. The missionary woman stood as an idealized educated woman in contrast to the image of the ignorant non-Christian woman. Flashes of her inefficiency were found in all the zenana reports. “In no sense can she be a friend to her husband. She is illiterate and her experience of men and things and her ability to advise her husband in matters not connected with domestic life, are absolutely nil.” 66

The missionaries believed education could wean these women from the downtrodden state and “free them from the caged” lives they led. The missionaries, hence, were required to defend education that strongly reflected rhetoricism. Most imperial representatives too sympathized with the missionary cause and felt education would strengthen the imperial good will. “It is the complete neglect of women’s education which accounts for the slight influence which the education of men has had upon the social life, customs and general thought of the country.... The influence of women in the homes is far greater in India than in our country,” said Lord Lytton, formerly Governor of the Punjab. 67

65 The Indian Female Evangelist. Vol. III, No. XIX. July 1876, p. 112.
Baptism for a 'Brighter' Future

Christianity gave the indigenous converts social and economic status that Hinduism denied. One of the local Harijan Sevak Sangh reported that 'the reasons for conversion may roughly be described as economic or socio-economic.'

The best way to exert Christian influence was to offer it as an alternative for all the 'suffering' faced by the zenana women. It was presented as a goal offering tremendous hope to the indigenous women. What the women missionaries displayed was unlimited potential in the field of 'heathenism'. It seemed that no one could give the message of Christ better than the missionary women themselves. And it was one of the biggest annoyances faced by the missionaries when due to lack of correct teaching their pupils lost interest in Christianity. Ms. Rose Greenfield observed,

A Hindu woman named Bhagwanti was a keen listener of the Gospel. She joined her husband who was a school master in the native regiment in Delhi. When she came the faith was gone. She told me that on one occasion her husband had asked his superior officer something about Christ and had received a rough reply to the effect that he didn't know and didn't care. It was sad to see our work marred.

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68 M.K. Gandhi, Christian Missions, Their Place in India, (Allahabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1914, p. 64.)
69 Rose Greenfield, Five Years in Ludhiana or Work Amongst our Indian Sisters, pp. 40-41.
The devotion exerted by the women missionaries asserted the fact that they could be the most effective catalysts for conversions. Hence, it became a matter of responsibility for them to show reports back home of the statistics of converts in the zenana work. They would fail in their endeavor if the indigenous people would not take to Christianity.

The path for the zenana worker and for the convert was not always smooth. Once baptism took place, both had to face severe rejection from the indigenous society. Mission, reports reveal when three prominent muslim women in Ludhiana were baptized in 1883, the missionaries found that their visits were no longer welcome. Of twenty four families visited by Ms. Wherry only six remained open to her, and a similar reduction took place in the work of the other ladies.70 Infact soon after baptism, the women had to be taken to Ferozepur for safety.71

While the exact effects of such experiences cannot be measured, it does not seem difficult to assume that Christianity did bring a change in the lives of the women it touched. Western ideas along with Christianity were integrated into the zenana work. But when it failed to intervene, the blame usually lay in the conservativeness of the Indian households. Many a times, the older women of the house were the culprits, whose influence was a very strong factor in the household.72 With adult natures and no general interests or education this personality was a considerable reactionary force in all domestic affairs, against

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71 *Ibid* p. 26
which the invasion of the house-to-house visitor was ineffectual.\textsuperscript{73} In such circumstances the question of conversion was highly unlikely. Problematic, too was the limited interest shown by the indigenous women to go beyond the basic learning of languages. Christianity was nowhere in sight as concluded by one of the zenana missionaries. "While she is helped on with Hindi, Persian or Urdu or shows her how to knit comforters, socks and gloves but have no desire whatsoever to learn of still better things."\textsuperscript{74} "Better things" were reading of Gospel and the understanding of Christianity.

There are innumerable instances of families where the women, when confined their belief in Christ, forbade the missionaries to enter the zenanas. A young Mohammedan woman had been converted and baptized, the husband of the former took alarm and sent word to the teacher not to come again.\textsuperscript{75} In such cases the missionaries could only pray that the "seed sown in these cases in good ground will bring forth fruit to eternal life." The missionary work was further legitimized when at such times, the ill-treatment of the husband entered missionary record. A Hindu woman at Fazilka had to visit Bible teacher's house at her own risk of abuse and blows from her husband who was hater of Christianity.\textsuperscript{76}

Moreover, the Punjabis strongly resented zenana missionaries for tampering with their womenfolk. On occasion they accused the missionaries of "kidnapping" and "girl stealing",

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid
\textsuperscript{74} 'Sowing and Reaping or Labour in the Field', \textit{India's Women}, May-June 1884, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{The Punjab Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America for the year 1906.} (Ludhiana :Ludhiana Mission Press,1907 p. 73.)
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid
whew a new Christian convert fled her 'heathen' environment for the protection of the sympathetic missionary.\textsuperscript{77} The convert as put up in the words of the missionaries “was a weak woman and a timid Christian, who deserved sympathy strength and encouragement from the missionaries.” Hence, the newly convert fell under the shelter of the missionary umbrella. The missionary women made it sure that they lead a life of security in lieu of the sacrifice made for their new faith. Among lay conversions, there were cases of converts with in the royal households, that further flared adverse publicity of the mission work.

Three begum princesses of the old royal family of Cabul came forward for baptism. No family ties were broken.\textsuperscript{78} They were brought in a covered carriage from their own house to the church and left immediately afterwards for Ferozepur.\textsuperscript{78} Nearly all Mohammedan houses were closed. The moulvies threatened to excommunicate any man who should allow a Miss Sahib to teach in his house.\textsuperscript{78}

The status of the female natives with regard to conversion remained a blank subject. Though often nameless in mission records, the women converts too related to Christianity in their

\textsuperscript{77} Kenneth Jones, \textit{Arya Dharm, Hindu Consciousness in 19th century Punjab} (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976, p. 9.)

\textsuperscript{78} M. Rose Greenfield, \textit{Five Years in Ludhiana}, pp. 33-34.
own will. When converted they at times came into profession guided by the missionaries.

A Mohammedan woman of good family came forward for baptism in 1892. Her husband cast her off as a bad woman, when she told him of her belief in Christ.... She told people she was going away. ‘Where’, they asked, ‘After Christ’, she was baptized at once and sent to Amritsar to learn nursing.79

And as discussed earlier in the chapter, the Bible woman was an example of an “employed” convert. It was in these areas than the women missionaries functioned as role models for the single indigenous women who came in contact with them.

The Indian woman was always at the receiving end of every missionary encounter and more than often she had to face harsh consequences for the devotion she showed for the new religion. What remains as a matter of speculation here is whether the missionaries encouraged such visits by inquisitive indigenous women or challenged the situation, this is a story uncovered in the mission reports. Since the missionaries were all set to enable Christianity to permeate in every household vis-à-vis the indigenous women, they at times created a debatable situation when the latter showed deep interest to learn the new scriptures. Christianity “granted escape from the treachery or imprisonment in her own house.” The question that rose was “How far may a

79 J K H. Denny, Toward the Sunrising p. 83.
missionary aid her convert in her desire to leave her home? Is it right for her to urge a woman to leave her home husband and children." 

It is not hard to understand that Christianity was put forth as an instrument for emancipation. Here the missionaries meant freedom for the indigenous woman and to inculcate the values of Christianity to the others at home. The missionary woman definitely did not want to be seen as a 'home-wrecker' when in an optimistic tone it was stated “Christ means every woman converted to Him to stay where He found her, so that she may give light to her family.”

The debate on the agenda continued. The missionaries felt the right to contradict their statement when Christianity was in jeopardy. They extended full protection only when a “woman was absolutely barred into the streets because she is a Christian and has nowhere to go, then a zenana missionary, is justified in receiving her...............”

The intensity of the problem continued when the indigenous groups decided to fight the encroachment of the missionaries in the Indian households. For them the real object of the “zenana mission in India was not to teach needle work to the native women but to decoy the latter into the Christian fold, Hindus should not therefore allow members of these missions to enter their homes..............”

Giving into suspicion of their work, the zenana activity of the woman missionaries remained tense. Baptism, in their own words meant breaking of caste, the utter separation from family, friends and becoming a

81 Ibid p. 94.
82 Ibid p. 95.
member of a ‘foreign’ community. How much ever they tried the missionaries were unable to remove the tag as ‘home-wreckers’. So great was their threat considered that “a fatwa was issued against any Muslim who allowed a zenana visitor into his home.”

Somewhere in the early encounters, perceptions were formed with regard to conversions and their religious background. The missionaries viewed that the acceptability of a convert depended on the religion she belonged to. A Hindu convert in comparison to a Mohammedan one evoked less hostility. For a muslim convert the situation was more difficult because she did not settle down easily in a Christian community whose members were almost all drawn from among the Hindus.84 In the years to come there was a shift in the missionary interpretation in terms of embracing Christianity. It was not a mere matter of religion as stated earlier, caste and vulnerability of situations such as famines added complexity to the process of conversion.

Missionary women yearned for any demonstration that expressed enthusiasm toward the listener. It was found that many of the “heathen” women were “Christian at heart”. What they meant is unclear, may be because of the objection from their near ones, the indigenous women openly did not accept faith or maybe they were merely making the visitors comfortable by laying such statements. Yet there are rare instances mentioned in the missionary writings that tell us about zenana conversions as an outcome of commitment towards faith.

CONCLUSION

It is only appropriate to end this chapter with the question that needs to be probed whose construction did the zenanas attribute to? The zenanas were depicted as a social space with an interactive relationship between the indigenous woman and the western woman. Both being marginalized in the patriarchal order, were determinants of the respective society they belonged to.

Reading the zenana accounts one can imagine to the extent to which Christian imagination in Britain was flared by the imagery of the ‘poor’ Hindu and muslim women. Missionary literature strongly reflected that by adopting a sense of superiority the missionary women put forth and at times exaggerated the need to bring social reform in the society. Zenana education hence, was the outcome of such visits. But ironically, the acceptability of education among the non-Christian and zenana women was far less than the indigenous Christian converts.

Although zenana visitation was not efficacious yet in either its educational or its evangelistic forms was an almost distinctively nineteenth century work, adapted to conditions which later changed.

Despite the fading of the zenana work in the beginning of the twentieth century yet the most conventional constructions of the indigenous women was to be found by the missionary women in the zenana itself. Here again, the western traveler alongwith the missionary woman defused herself with the cause of social
reform. The missionary women were feminists only to a certain degree. The moment they realized that their approach in the traditional set up of the Indian society could be harmful to their position in the mission field, the women missionaries withdrew. With zenana as a backdrop, the women's movement gradually became more institutional-oriented with a blend of Christian service. Their entry into the zenanas was an achievement in itself for the women missionaries, the gain was theirs. The irony remained that for the indigenous women exposure to western thoughts came in the form of mission institutionalization and not within the zenana quarters.