

## Book Review

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<b>Title</b>	: <i>Off the Beaten Track: The Story of My Unconventional Life</i>
<b>Author</b>	: Saeeda Bano
<b>Translator</b>	: Shahana Raza
<b>Publishers</b>	: Zubaan & Penguin Random House
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*Off the Beaten Track: The Story of My Unconventional Life* is a story of a woman who had traversed difficult paths to craft a life of her own choice. Popularly known as the doyenne of Urdu broadcasting, Saeeda Bano's delightful memoir encapsulates the author's life in a vivid manner simultaneously holding mirror to the prominent socio-political and cultural milieu of the pre and post Independent India. After twenty years of being originally published in Urdu as *Dagar Se Hat Ke*, it was translated by Saeeda's granddaughter Shahana Raza, an independent writer and a journalist. In her article "Why I Translated this Book?" Raza delineates the reasons for translating the text which turned out to be a herculean task. The need to translate the memoir stems from the fact that the narrative is rich and replete with incidents capturing the ethnic culture and ethos of Bhopal, Lucknow and Delhi. The text breathes a fresh air into the historical legacy of these cities and brings into life the suave etiquettes that distinguished the sub-ethnic Muslim communities from each other.

Interspersed with Urdu Ghazals and couplets, the memoir offers the readers a rich reading experience in terms of personally drawing them into the living space of Saeeda—both emotionally and physically. Thanks to the meticulous translation of Raza, who has done justice to retain the rich Urdu flavor of the text with the aid of Urdu language experts who came to her rescue when she was stumped by Saeeda's sophisticated choice of words. The text lucidly documents the journey of a feisty woman who

paves way for her freedom by untangling the complicated knots that hinder her journey to success. Saeeda's transition from a guileless young woman to a strong personality defying the religious and cultural conventions defines the course of the novel.

Born into the city of Bhopal, the author's childhood days were spent in a typical Muslim household that adhered to rigid religious mores. Being the youngest daughter of the family, Saeeda's childhood antics was illustrative of her rebellious attitude as she refused to confine to the standards imposed by the elders. The memoir unravels various instances in which she enters into minor scuffles with her elder sister who was often bewildered by her younger sister's non-conformity.

While documenting her childhood days in Bhopal that was ruled by Begums for four generations, Saeeda gives a glimpse of the city that placed utmost importance to women's education. Undoubtedly, the aura of women's emancipation and freedom was palpable in the socio-political atmosphere of Bhopal that impacted the young mind of the author. Unfortunately, she was forced into matrimony during her teenage much against her wishes and got relocated to her husband's city in Lucknow. Saeeda's transition from Bhopal to Lucknow is juxtaposed with her emotional transition from being a carefree young girl to the daughter-in-law of an elite Muslim family. In her memoir, she debunks the observation of Lucknow and the repressive patriarchal atmosphere of the city which nevertheless bewildered her.

Saeeda's path towards understanding her 'self' corresponds with the drastic changes that happen within her personal space and the society. When she moves to Delhi with her two sons to take up the job of an Urdu news broadcaster, the text throws light into the turbulent socio-political situation prevailing in the city. As the country was preparing for its independence, Saeeda prepares for a challenging life as she had to manage her family as a single woman after having walked out of a difficult marriage life. Along with her sons, she is caught up in the sweeping changes of partition and bearing the brunt of Muslim identity, she spends many days in the refugee camp until the situation becomes safe enough for her to resume work. Some of the poignant incidents chronicled in the memoir portray the moments of epiphany wherein Saeeda experiences an inner fortitude that enables her to tackle adverse situations.

Filled with anecdotes that draw the reader into the inner mindscapes of the author, *Off the Beaten Track* reflects the many shades of a woman who

was much ahead of her times. The narrative style of Saeeda renders a poetic composition as she neatly interweaves an appropriate Ghazal to reinstate the emotions associated with specific incidents in her life. Shahana Raza's admiration for her grandmother is palpable in the painstakingly done translation work which brought her more closer to the stark realities and challenges faced by Muslim women of her society. Raza's realization that her grandmother's life was not that of an ordinary Muslim woman was one of the significant impetus for translating the memoir "As I got acquainted with the intricacies of Bibi's (Saeeda) unique life, I felt more people need to hear her story to understand that what we take for granted, is what she fought for: the right to make a choice for herself-as a woman, back in the days when they were kept behind purdah-a choice she didn't have, but one she fearlessly carved out. In the 1930s no one could have condoned or accepted incompatibility as a reason to walk out of a marriage, especially when two children were involved. Bibi excised choice when she packed her bags and left the comfort of Lucknow society to tackle the hardships of living and working in Delhi as a single woman. In a strange way I feel that is why she wrote Dagar, to explain what she went through and how hopeless she felt at times".

Saeeda's unconventional choices liberated her from the cloistered identity of being a 'Muslim woman' which nevertheless attracted harsh criticisms. Her undeterred spirit of enthusiasm coupled with passion to grow and explore in her career amidst all the odds indeed forms the crux of the memoir. A timely intervention of her granddaughter to translate the memoir is a certainly a welcome move otherwise Saeeda and her story would have gone unnoticed. Though Saeeda initially had doubts about penning down her autobiography as she frequently kept asking herself "Who do I ask if this rusty old story of my life is even worth a read?", she still went ahead to complete the task. *Off the Beaten Track* is certainly a valuable reading experience. What makes Saeeda endearing to her readers is that she is inseparable from her memoir. Saeeda's persona and her text merge effortlessly to render the many shades of a woman who redefined freedom in her own proverbial style. Woven into the backdrop of her life is an entire universe comprising of individuals of a social system that constantly criticized her for the choices she made. However, the memoir bears testimony to her steely spirit that propelled her to move on. Saeeda's inspiring life story still moves on through the pages of the memoir that concludes with a befitting quote by Omar Khayyam "The moving finger writes and having writ, moves on"