

MA English Second Semester

Literature and Gender – Rashid Jahan

Published in JSL /19 Journal of the School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi

Rashid Jahan “Angaareywali”: Woman “Behind the Veil”

Rashid Jahan was a prominent member of the Progressive Writers’ Movement and also perhaps the most controversial. Kashmiri Brahmin Thakur Das converted to Islam and became well known as Shaikh Abdullah. His daughter Rashid Jahan was born in 1905 in an atmosphere of colonial reform. The year coincides with the publication of a brilliant satire Sultana’s Dream by a Bengali Muslim Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

Rashid Jahan is not simply a name, a feminist who pioneered the Muslim women’s movement in India. She is the first Muslim feminist playwright who not only served society as a doctor but also raised her voice against the oppressive attitude of men, of orthodox religion and society towards its women, the poor and the marginalized. As a pioneering figure of the Progressive Writers’ Movement Rashid Jahan had the courage and tenacity to speak against injustice, inequality and inimical forces that led to the suppression of the dependent and the weak. An enlightened woman deeply committed to the social and intellectual movements of her times, Rashid Jahan’s family was at the forefront “of the intellectual and educational reformist movements in the Muslim community at the turn of the twentieth century” (Attia Abid, i). Her father, mother and aunts were involved in setting up schools and colleges for women in Aligarh. No repressive father or a conservative mother, but a very supportive extended family that encouraged her to pursue her interest in literature and medicine. Rashid Jahan’s casual remark: “We slept on the mattress of women’s education and covered ourselves with the quilt of women’s education from our earliest consciousness.”(Attia Abid, i) is linked with her desire for feminist development. From the school established by her father in Aligarh, Rashid Jahan moved to Isabella Thoburn College Lucknow and later joined Lady Hardinge College in Delhi. Under the influence of Gandhi she chose to wear Khadi and also opted to be a vegetarian. Her first story in English was published in IT College magazine “When the TomTom Beats”, the story was translated in Urdu as “Salma”.

Lucknow is a literary shrine for lovers of Urdu literature. **Angaarey** was first published in 1932 by Nizami Press at Victoria Street in Lucknow. At the time it was priced at four annas and a thousand copies were printed. It had one woman and three men as chief collaborators who joined hands to bring out a literary journal in Urdu addressing social beliefs, customs and practices that inscribed a culture of shameless subjugation and refusal to create a viable space for the underdogs of the society. Most of these writers had Marxist leanings (excluding Ahmad Ali) and shared affinities (they were all Muslims) and thus familiar with religious injunctions, social sanction and the exacting configurations of power that impacted lives of Muslim women. In March 1933 **Angaarey** was proscribed by the Govt of the United Provinces under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code for hurting the “religious susceptibilities of a section of the community” (Coppola 61). The collection was criticized for not only being “vulgar”, but for “violation of ideas”, “obscene, morally depraved, base, filthy and foul, trash, shameless” are some of the appellations attributed to the collection. Rashid Jahan (niece of Sajjad Zaheer, later married Mahmuduzzafar a committed Communist) she contributed a One act Play and a short story to **Angaare**. Hazra Begum, one of the first generation communist was a teacher in Lucknow at Karamat Hussain Girls College, a friend of Rashid Jahan she clearly expressed her views: “While printing **Angaare** Sajjaad Zaheer had no inkling that it would become a symbol of enlightenment and new experience. Soon it led to a furore and fatwas were issued against Rashid Jahan Angare wali”. No other middle class Indian Muslim woman had ever so unequivocally rebuked male chauvinism, religious bigots and the mechanisms of exploitation. Threatened with severe consequences (disfiguring of the body, burning of the face, chopping of the nose) for daring to bare the ugly visage of the masculine hegemonic forces Rashid Jahan, the warrior, not only refused protection, but continued to serve the poor and sick in the seedy by lanes of the city. After marriage in 1934 to her fellow comrade Mahmuduzzafar, she set up successful private practice in Lucknow, but most of her earnings went to the Communist party, of which her husband was a full time member. She edited a political magazine Chingari. Rashid popular as Rasheeda, wrote stories and Radio plays, and was also responsible for setting up the Lucknow chapter of IPTA- Indian people’s theatre association. She dramatized Premchand’s short story **Kafan**.

As suggested by Geraldine Forbes:“ The political demands of the Nationalist movement had a profound effect on women, giving them new roles and opportunities to prove themselves in a very different milieu.” (Forbes 2) The ideal Indian woman was being redefined and the old

ideas on motherhood and deference to male authority were being reinvigorated. Women were striving to forge a new identity by engaging themselves in the nationalist struggle for freedom instead of becoming “carbon copies of Western Feminists” (Forbes 11).

“For the women of the 1920 and 1930s it was clear that freedom from restrictive customs would make it possible for them to contribute to the regeneration of India.” (Forbes 18) The first wave feminism in India is marked by a distinct desire in woman for political and legal rights and an uncanny awareness of the ambiguity of her status in the eyes of men. The women’s movement of the early 1920’s and 30’s in India should not be laughed at “as a parody of Western Feminism” (Forbes 25) many of these women who were concerned with women’s rights were part of the political movement, but almost all of them had come to “politics” through “social work”, and a sense of service. Rashid Jahan is a case in point. While most of the earlier writings in Urdu were androcentric (the world was viewed from a man’s perspective) Rashid Jahan gives her women a voice and visibility. Not only did she question the dynamics of power in her short stories, but she addressed women’s subordination in her plays. She chose theatre as a viable medium of expression and liberation which helped her explore sexism in society.

Her interest in drama regardless of social opposition led to the foundations of a vigorous theatre group. Jahan recognized the need for self expression and used her pen as a medium of dissent against patriarchy and religious bigotry. Anxious about women’s subordination, she chose to critique the primacy of the patriarchal Muslim character.

If on one hand the word progressive has been associated with a wide range of themes, it is a fairly ambiguous term for a movement where *taraqqiyat* and *tabdeel* were perceived in large measure with a desire to initiate reform, change, development and progress. As a literary watershed in the social, intellectual and political history of India the progressive movement consisted of writers from the upper middle class who were joined by intellectuals, journalists, academics with a communist bent of mind. They not only critiqued the tenets of Hinduism and Islam but also mocked at those beliefs and practices which led to the marginalization of a certain section of society. *Taraqqi pasand adab*- progressive literature had a young generation of writers who believed in social equality, equal opportunity, discarded the notion of an all powerful religion and revolted against sexual oppression. According to Pietrangelo these writers were “prone to atheism, to frankness regarding sexuality and to revolt against traditional Indian morals.” (Pietrangelo 164). However Geeta Patel argues in its later phase

PWA suggested “Selective alignment” and not a complete repudiation of tradition.

First published in 1932 **Behind the Veil** quite realistically conveys the domestic situations in which women develop a bonding and overtly question their roles within family and community. The primary aim of this paper is to look at disquieting issues related to gender and society.

I would like to mention briefly the significant role played by small scale publishing houses that have contributed to the growth of literature. Dastavez Prakashan in its inaugural issue which was published in April 1991 with the support of Prashant its Chief Editor came out with the Hindi translation of **Angaare** from Lucknow. The stories were translated by Shakeel Siddiqui a creative writer and a translator. After a period of 58 years Angaarey resurfaced in Devnagri with the help and support of some like minded people – late Mohan Thapaliyal, Roop Rekha Verma were some of the enthusiasts who provided editorial support.

Parde ke Peeche - Behind the Veil is a one act play – a feminist manifesto with unsettling issues, one in which Rashid Jahan seeks to unveil the rabid and shameless display of masculine authority. Her one act play is significant for the courage with which she challenged the conservative social discourse in a genre prominently practiced by men. She calls into question the all pervasive patriarchy. She confronts the split between the two worlds inhabited by men and women. As a well informed gynaecologist who practiced medicine at Lucknow, Rashid Jahan was familiar with the tensions between marriage and motherhood. Not only does she candidly write about woman as an object of desire but also recognizes the constraints imposed on woman’s body due to depressing experience of repeated pregnancies and contradictory male fantasies. I shall argue that the text as a site of collision provided an ambiguous challenge to the reader/ audience of her times and is linked with the debate on literature and life recognisable in the concluding words of Premchand’s Presidential speech at the first Progressive Writers’ Conference in Lucknow where he insisted on “a literature which instils in us dynamism and restlessness...**because to go on sleeping now would be a sign of death**”.

Constant child bearing has been a source of eternal bondage for Muhammadi Begum. She is in her thirties but feels like a seventy year old. With little or no control over her body the woman finds it difficult to cope with aggressive male desire. The play signifies an intense

moment of sharing between the two women. Being a part of the same community Aftaab and Muhammadi begum are able to commune, communicate, share and talk without inhibitions. The Zenana becomes “the free space” “within which women could articulate the inarticulate, admit the inadmissible”. (461 Mac Kinnon in Sheila Ruth) Heterosexual love is conspicuous by its absence. Intimate conversation between women is crucial in foregrounding marriage as the signifier of women’s suppression and male gratification. Even motherhood and its inhibitory influence on the health and happiness of women evoke ambivalence of sorts. As a bearer of her husband’s progeny she lives a life of guilt for she is discouraged from nurturing and nursing her infant child. “But it’s his own pleasure he’s thinking about. If the baby was with me he’d be inconvenienced. Doesn’t matter whether it’s day or night, he wants his wife. And not only his wife. He goes the rounds to other women too”. (Jahan in De Souza 465) Is it not striking that Rashid Jahan brings out the anger and anguish of her woman in this explosive outpouring? “It is in writing, from woman and toward woman, and in accepting the challenge of the discourse controlled by the phallus, that woman will affirm woman...” (Cixous 93). Jahan’s profession gave her access to women’s inner world. She often came across women who were harassed, repressed and subjected to sexual torture in most disturbing ways. Years of involvement in the world of medicine makes her sensitive to issues of women’s health and happiness. Body becomes a site through which religion, class, caste and gender dynamics is received, reiterated and reified. Jahan draws our attention to a minor scuffle between the siblings. Reading of novels or romances is prohibited. The young brother catches his sister reading:

“Shall I tell mummy you were reading trashy books? The Loving Friend, or The Lively Lad. I didn’t see properly what it was”. To which the girl responds: “I swear by God I was reading Maulvi Ashraf Ali Thanavi’s Bahishti Zewar.”(Heavenly Ornaments) (467). The emphasis was on the domestic roles assigned to women. According to Metcalf “For women to act as they should, this work argues they must be instructed”. The text is about “Cultivating virtues”, “Correct knowledge” and “correct behaviour”. It is an advice journal in which Thanavi used Islamic injunctions to guide Muslim women as better mothers and good wives. “Ä classic gift for the Muslim brides” who would enter their new home with Holy Quran in one hand and Bahishti Zewar in the other.(Metcalf, 3) Behind this struggle is a debate integral to women and literature. Women were encouraged to educate themselves but should never become a threat to male identity. Metcalf argues “Thanwi perhaps intended to discourage the privacy of reading silently, of creating a private world of one’s own inner

voice by losing oneself- a terrible image; in Thanawi's view in books like novels" (Metcalf 21). It is important to recognize the socio-historical and cultural specificities of these women's existence. Realism in *Parde ke Picche* is symptomatic of Rashid Jahan's own attitude towards freedom 'independence was the essence of Apabi's nature and she wanted it for everyone'. (Khurshid Mirza 94). Upper class women were discouraged from reading novels, writing poetry, watching plays. The *Zenana* says Minault "was the locus of both extravagance and ignorance" and the solution to it was "scriptural piety and intellectual discipline as prescribed by men". (Minault 5) As suggested by Burton, home is not merely a "dwelling place for women's memory but is one of the foundations for history" and "Imagining home is as political an act as is imaging the nation". And it is inside the home that she must first embody grace and eroticism "restrained by modesty". Marriage is the litmus test for women and breaking of rules by them is considered a breach of trust and tradition.

If Muhammadi is sick of the burden of constant child bearing Aftaab is disappointed with her son who is in a relationship with a Christian woman. As Gopal asserts "this work attempts to "unveil" the workings of a sphere that...tends to be less visible than the public sphere with regard to processes of modernization and democratization"(Gopal a 39). . At the outset Muhammadi Begum is a fulfilled woman with a home, a house full of servants, husband and children, but deep inside Muhammadi is dissatisfied. The husband's constant craving for female body, his unconcern for his wife's health, his demands and desire for possession and also his infidelity is chillingly voiced in the play by Rasheed Jahan. The plight is reinforced by the lady doctor's remark. Not only does she highlight decadent masculinity but also moral depravity of the Muslim zealots. "How can your children be strong and healthy when, for one thing, you're so weak, and then you have children so quickly – one after another" (466). It is important to assert that western education was linked with promiscuity and loss of integrity by the conservatives and Christian woman embodied all the vices of a fallen woman ready to ensnare the gullible male. However women like Rashid Jehan were striving to forge a new identity by engaging themselves in the nationalist struggle for freedom and her literary contribution is symbolic of her resolve. The systematic refusal to accept women as individuals with a mind of their own has been treated with a note of severity by Rashid Jahan. The play continues to haunt us with its earnest ability to influence women, irritate men and inscribe history with social and political complexities. Not only does she bring out the profound inequality between the sexes, but also explores and reconstructs the ability of

women to reassert their identity and puncture masculine hegemony through the trope of female bonding in their everyday lives. Her main concern is women's health primarily related to reproduction and motherhood. In the play Behind the veil women are expected to betray no signs of childbearing, age, exhaustion, ill health, sexual inertia. John Berger sums up neatly: "To be born a woman has to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men". Preserving her curves, burning of calories, maintaining her physique, keeping herself beautiful and ever willing to satisfy the patriarchal lust, an offering for male gratification are signs of woman as victims of objectification and has firm resonances in the play- **Behind the veil**. The play serves to highlight how the submission to the invasive surgical procedures is medically unnecessary and can often carry unacknowledged risks. (209 Gamble)

"And I live in fear all the time. God take me away before I have to see the face of a co-wife. I've had myself operated on twice...My womb and all my lower parts had fallen. I got it put right so that he could get the same pleasure again as he'd got from a newly-married wife. But when a woman has a baby every year how can she stay in good shape?" (Jahan in De Souza 471)

The female body succumbs to the deeply misogynistic and offensive ways of reclaiming the ideal feminine shape. In a society that values ephemeral youth and beauty, woman lives with a deep fear of failure and insecurity if she is no longer young and desirable – what she dreads is the prospect of a second wife or a divorce or a straying husband. On the contrary the lady doctor serves as a signifier of economic and social freedom. "You earn your living; you eat well and sleep soundly. It's not like that with us"(466). Jahan's work subversively traces reasons for women's oppression. She recognizes the need for women's education and employment on a wider scale. There is another example of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain who put into practice her visionary zeal by setting up a school in Bhagalpur, Bihar and one in Calcutta for Muslim women. As a writer she spoke with authority on the custom of Purdah. Seclusion, she writes "is not a gaping wound, hurting people. It is rather a silent killer like carbon monoxide gas". (in Forbes (a) 57)

As a gynaecologist Jahan took personal interest in women's health and gave them tips on domestic hygiene, regular sanitation, child care and maternity wards. "Purposeful activity and enthusiasm for a cause" is the essential feature of her life as well as her writing. She was "Responsible for encouraging Muslim girls to go into nursing, which was very difficult then,

as it is now". (94 Hamida Saiduzzafar).

"It was important for her to be in touch with people" (ibid 95).

It is equally important to note that significant contribution was being made by other Muslim women in this period. In this context it is also interesting to note down Sultan Jahan Begum's contribution to women's health in Bhopal in the 1920s. The Begum was able to revive the Unani medical tradition in her state and firmly believed in liberal education for women. In 1922 she wrote Al Hijab (Why Purdah is Necessary?) in defense of the practice, but became uneasy with it and later condemned it as anti islamic in her Presidential address to AIWC in 1928: "I have no hesitation to own that the purdah system as observed among the Muslims of India is not exactly Islamic and indeed very harmful to the progress of education among our girls". (qtd in Mann 115) Education, veiling, polygamy, divorce, age of marriage were topics of intense debate. The question of female inheritance too becomes an ideological issue of prime importance in Jahan and she talks about women's share in property. A significant query is embedded in the crucial discussion on women and their legitimate rights. In her play **Aurat**, Jahan ironically, breaks through the sequence and asserts Muslim women's right to property inheritance and the confidence it gives to her protagonist, Fatima Bi : "Evict the tenants ! you dare to do that? My father gave this house to me. Even your *jinn*s cannot evict those people, who are you..."she tells her husband. (Abid 248).

"Ownership of property as empowerment is further reinforced" (Bhatia51) by her aunt:

This is your house, gifted to you by your father. What right has he to bring his second wife into this house? If he is so keen to marry again, let him set her up somewhere else" (254 *Aurat* trans Attia abid) . As Patel observes: "Rashid Jahan's behaviour as a literary figure obviously doubly violated codes for a pardah nashin, woman under pardah: refusing to live under pardah she also made its violences the targets of her critique" (Patel 99).

By doing so she not only smashed the code of silence, but tacitly conveyed that oppression can only be countered by creating an awareness of one's rights in religion and society. Consciousness raising was integral to her writing and profession. Mahua Sarkar argues "Muslim women in Colonial India is a rather understudied area within Indian Historiography. (Sarkar 320). There is a need to reassess, reinvent, revise and retrieve the place of Rashid Jahaan in the feminist discourse.

“The key to feminist theory consists in its way of knowing. Consciousness raising is that way. “An oppressed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it, and at the same time project its own image on to history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it has to become visible to itself. All revolutionary movements create their own way of seeing”.(quote from SheilaRowbotham in MacKinnon, Gamble 459). Urdu as a language of Indian nationalism had an extraordinary force – *inquliab zindabad* – long live the revolution – had a distinct bearing on the literature of this period. The woman warrior, the dedicated communist, the compassionate gynaecologist and the artist in Jahan continued to inspire her “first spiritual heir” Ismat Chughtai and was followed by Khadeeja Mastoor, Quratulain Haider, Manto and several others.

In her is a potent mix of revolutionary activism, nationalistic fervour and liberal humanism and it is to her writings that one must return if we wish to know what one *Angaarey Waali* could do to raise the consciousness of many men and women of her times.

References

1. Attia Abid (trans from urdu) Dr Rasheed Jahan Selected Short Stories and Plays. Female Education Association Aligarh 2005
2. Berger John Ways of Seeing London BBC and Penguin Books 1972
3. Bhatia Nandi performing women/performing womanhood: Theatre, Politics, And Dissent in North India Oxford University Press 2010.
4. Burton Antoinette Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in the Late Colonial India OUP, 2003.
5. Coppola Carlo “The Angare Group: The Enfant Terribles of Urdu Literature”, Annual of Urdu Studies vol.1, 57-69. 1981.
6. Forbes Geraldine Women in Colonial India Orient Blackswan, 2005.
a) Women in Modern India Cambridge University Press, 1998.
7. Gamble Sarah Feminism and Postfeminism Routledge 2001
8. Gopal Priyamvada “Sex , Space and Modernity in the work of Rashid Jahan,

“Angareywaali” in *Marxism Modernism and Postcolonialism* Cambridge University Press 2002, pp150-66.

9. Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement (Trans Betsy Wing) The Newly Born Woman Manchester University Press 1987.
10. Hossain Rokeya Sakhawat Sultana’s Dream Tara Books U.K. 2005 (first pub 1905)
11. Khan Saiduzzafar Hamida Autobiography (ed Lola Chatterjee) Trianka Delhi 1996
12. Khurshid Mirza A Woman of Substance: Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza 1918-1989 ed Lubna Kazim New Delhi Zubaan, 2005.
13. Kumar Prashant Ed Samkaleen Dastavez, Angaarey (Trans. Shakeel Siddiqui) (Devnagri) Vol:1, Lucknow April 1991
14. MacKinnon Catherine “Consciousness Raising” in Issues in Feminism Shiela Ruth Mayfield Pub, California 1998.
15. Mahmduzzafar S Quest for Life People’s Publishing House Bombay 1954.
16. Mann Rajwanti Social radicalism in Urdu Literature: A Study of Gender Issues and Problems, 1930-1960 Manohar Publishers New Delhi 2011
17. Metcalf Barbara: Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi’s Bihishti Zewar (Trans with Commentary) (first pub1905)
18. Minault Gail Secluded Scholars:Women’s Education and Muslim Social reform in Colonial India OUP, New Delhi 1998
19. Pietrangelo Valerio “Urdu Literature and Women (Student Paper)” *The Annual of Urdu Studies* University of Wisconsin Madison Vol19 2004 pp151-172.
20. Sarkar Mahua “Looking For Feminism”, in *Gender and History* Vol 16, no.2, Aug 2004 pp 318-333.
21. Souza Eunice de Purdah An Anthology OUP New Delhi 2004.
22. Tharu S; and K.Lalita (eds) *Women Writing in India : 600B.C. to the Present* Vol 1 Delhi OUP 1993.

Professor
Department of English and Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow