

RADICAL WRITINGS ON WOMEN: THE WORK OF DR. RASHID JAHAN

Dr. Madhulika Singh
Assistant Professor,
Department of History
University of Jammu,
Jammu

Dr. Rashid Jahan, acclaimed as one of the pioneers of radical writings on women's issues. She emerged as a prominent feminist writer of 20th century as she has made a pioneering inroad into the literary public sphere by claiming for herself and for other women, the authority to speak about women's bodies, sex and about modernity, science, progress, ethics that marked a new phase in the interpretation of women's issues in Modern Indian literature.ⁱ A medical practitioner, interested and influenced with communism, she was also one of the founder members of the Progressive Writers' Association which shaped and moulded her ideas, giving form and substance to her desire to bring about lasting social change.

Remembered as a life long campaigner for women's rights, she made use of her writings like short stories, one act plays in Urdu to communicate focused messages in a short span to time.ⁱⁱ

This paper throws light on her legacy as an icon of the progressive writings. She explored with boldness the unconventional, sensitive and taboo subjects on women which were not earlier discussed. Her work enables us to think through contentious and urgent questions for contemporary feminism.

She inherited the legacy of education as her father was a well known educationist and reformer, Sheikh Abdullah, who emerged out of the Aligarh Movement. He was a secretary of female education section of All India Mohammadan Conference, who founded the widely circulated Urdu journal for women (*Khatun*). Her mother Wahid Jahan was also a frequent contributor to it. Besides this inherited legacy, the influence of communism also coloured her perceptionⁱⁱⁱ.

One could trace the radicalizing trend in literary writing in India with the publication of *Angare* in 1932-an anthology of ten short stories which became controversial. Along with Sajjad Zaheer, who edited it, Ahmed Ali, Mahammudu jafar and Rashid Jahan were the young authors of *Angare* who belonged to the upper strata of the Muslim community. They felt the urge to do something to explore the hypocrisy and stagnation in their own literature and society, published the stories depicting mores of the Muslim community.^{iv} The anthology dealt with the lives of the most disenfranchised, disempowered and downtrodden was particularly focused on the deplorable condition of women. It also explored the case of women marginalization and exclusion. These writers of *Angare*, critiqued Islamic orthodoxy through their stories which contained good deal of anger and agitation against obsolete and retrogressive values. Being born in that community, they showed an acutely critical awareness of the world around them, and felt themselves better qualified to speak for that alone. This idea of self criticism from within and self critical literature developed within the community.^v

Rashid Jahan contributed a story and a play, *Dilli Ki Sair* (A Tour of Delhi) and *Parde Ke Peechhe* (*Behind the Veil*) in *Angare*, when she had just completed her medical education from the Lady Harding Medical College in Delhi. This dramatic documentary represented the ennuis of a sick society and exposed the evils of feudal patriarchy, where sickness and health of a wife would no meaning for husband.^{vi}

'*Behind the veil*' is a bitter rant by a married woman who lives her life in seclusion. . It is also an account of victim's experience of oppressive domesticity. The play also highlights the spatial geography of traditional conjugality. The story depicts woes of women's marriage at an early age, poor health, infidelity of men, divorce threat, fear of unwanted pregnancies and anxiety about loosing looks.^{vii}

The title veil refers to the discursive and material barrier that attempted to demarcate private from public and also unveiled the private sphere that tends to be less visible than the public. The curtain in being lifted of the domestic, feminine atmosphere of *Zanana* or women's quarter. Besides, gender relations in the domestic sphere, it also presents doctor- patient relationship which gives opportunity to her women character to articulate her own physical, mental and emotional state. Rashid Jahan, offers an account of diagnosis and treatment by the doctor, who explains that premature aging is the result of endless pregnancies and ill health.

Rashid Jahan's literary imagination reflected her own life experiences as a doctor which shaped her social analysis. Her contact with women patients across classes shaped her thinking. Only the diagnosis was not enough for her, she wanted a treatment, a cure. Similarly, here character of female doctor in '*Behind the Veil*' finds that it is not enough to go behind the veil and eradicate the disease but she must herself advocate the spread of education and transformation. The play reflected the consciousness she wants to be regarding women's health and importance of taking care of their bodies.^{viii}

Through her write up, she attempted to educate native women of the benefits of western scientific medical knowledge of which she was a part. Taking up such themes, she advocated modern scientific secular thought in relation to the female body.^{ix} She talked about the ill effects of excessive child bearing on the bodies and psyche of women. Issues of multiple pregnancies and prevalent perception of wife as a sex object and progenitor of children especially sons. She examined how the social attitudes of this kind were depriving women of humanness.

Her use of conversational style and dialogues rendered in colloquial speech captured the nuanced lives of women emphatically exposing the social injustice and sickness of society. However, there was a strong reaction after its publication. The writings decried by the orthodox sections, religious zealots and celebrated by young readers especially those conversant with modern education. In progressive families she became a symbol of the emancipation of women. Conversely, religious zealots were unable to bear the fact that how a Muslim woman could rebel against and write boldly on sexual matters, women's body and oppression in a largely puritanical patriarchal milieu. She was a prime target of the campaign, and lampooned, satirized as Rashid Jahan *Angarewali* in the vernacular press and even threatened with death. She became the public face of *Angare*.^x

Priyambada Gopal writes (in her work *Radicalism in India*) "Rashid Jahan as a women-doctor, writing about gender, medicine and politics of space became the icon of the literary radicalism of *Angare* itself."

The publication of *Angare* and the subsequent ban on it by the United Province government is instructive with regard to the role of the gender in the construction of radical cultural discourse in the transitional India.^{xi}

Additionally, *Angare*, and its defining features of radical literary tradition acted as a foundation stone of literary realism, self criticism and also facilitated the formation of Progressive Writers Association in 1936 in Lucknow.^{xii}

Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan and others were the founder members and also associated with this literary cultural movement.

The Progressive Writers Association established the importance of literature as a tool of social awakening, and opened up institutional space for discussion of diverse issues for regeneration of the nation and national culture. It created and supported network of writers concerned with social and cultural transformation. Though the organization had links with the communist party but it tried to maintain political heterogeneity and heterogeneous membership.^{xiii} Premchand's inaugural address offered a new direction and definition of literature undermining stereotypes.^{xiv}

Writers affiliated with the movement brought a fresh sense of intervention for the process of recognizing problems and working through them to broaden the meaning and scope of freedom. The years about 1936 to 1954 were the heydays of highly influential radical cultural movement that spanned several regions, languages across India. It inspired the production of a body of literature, interrogating both communal and national collective identities.^{xv} The movement also impacted on Rashid Jahan's own understanding of both literature and the role of a writer. Though deeply invested in anti-colonialism, she saw political subjugation as a problem, her ideology presages for institutional change at different levels.

Her association with Progressive Writers' movement made her understand that the writers' primary task was to counter backlash, reactionary and revivalist tendencies on the question related with family, religion, sex and society.^{xvi}

Rashid Jahans' post-Angare writings' in the light of her association with the Progressive Writers' Association were haunted by certain questions. How to transform social and national consciousness as the colonial regime would lower its flag and independent nation would come into being. How to reactivate and radicalize the snatched intellectual resources and consciousness of the transitional period? The challenges of such projects became apparent in her work.^{xvii}

She is believed to have written 25-30 short stories and around 15-20 plays, many of them were produced for the radio, which she considered as a powerful medium for mass communication. Unfortunately, the great bulk of these material have been lost. Her oeuvre as it exits today is in the form of "*Aurat-Aur Deegar Drame Wa Afsane and 'Woh' Aur Doosere Afsane Wa Drame*".

'*Woh*' was published in the collection of short stories during her life time. *Aurat-aur Deegar Afsane Va Drame*, published in a Journal with limited circulation.^{xviii}

She developed short scripts in the form of plays largely on the questions of middle class muslim women. While working, she understood that the question of gender cannot be studied in isolation from the other issues.^{xix}

Her story '*Woh*' translated as "that one" is about a prostitute suffering from venereal disease and how she was treated within her social premises. '*Woh*' raises an important question for feminist scholarship as what should be the dimension in which the working class woman could be imagined in stories or those at margins.

Additionally, it is also an account of the nation and national modernity-the institution and spaces they create for those outside the centre. Moreover, it deals with the kind of social

exclusion that was at work in the hegemonic intellectual paradigm. Moreover, the marginalized social groups and the very sense of their exclusion is also highlighted.^{xx}

The story lay out the spatial and institutional configuration that enabled the encounter between the two women. The narrator of the story belonged to the middle class female professional narrating about a working class women and the public exploitation of whose labour and sexuality has long been institutionalized.

The narrative took the rhetoric of *afsana* or romantic stories that was especially popular with the female readership and used it to set up a contrast between what it sees as the privileged world of a narrator and the wretchedness of *That one*- the prostitute's sufferings. The earthly Rashid Jahan has explored the realism of life with its stark nakedness. Moreover, *that one* (Woh) is also a kind of social critique.^{xxi}

Another much talked about work of Rashid Jahan, published with the collection of *Angare* was *Dilli Ki Sair* translated as '*Tour to Delhi*'. A brief anecdotal story about a woman who is taken by her husband for a promised tour to the Indian capital. The story is in the form of reminiscences, an experiences recounted to friends who were curious to get the detail, as she having been the first to have sat in train. But her husband left her at the railway station with the luggage and disappeared with his friend for hours. Her observation at the railway station is presented in homely simple language. The story is a poignant message about men's complete lack of concern for women's feeling.^{xxii}

'*A Tour to Delhi*' is in fact a telling commentary on a much vaunted reform project of bringing women out of the domestic seclusion into public spaces structured by colonial national modernity which figured it as a charitable act. The story shows that the domain of public is no subversion of or improvement on the sphere of the domestic. In contrast, the story suggests that women's objectives and desires must necessarily shape their emergence in to new spaces if the move is to be of true emancipation.. The story, however, attempted to explore the question as to how women in fact would develop a habitus that would genuinely bring them out of seclusion, enabling them to be full participants in the remaking of the world around them.^{xxiii}

Thus, Rashid Jahan's story is as much an account of gendered domestic disharmony and alienation as it is of the sexual politics of public spaces.^{xxiv}

Similarly, her women character in '*Aurat*' raised the issue of the importance of property rights for women, which prompts rethinking of the implementation of rights to inherit and control property. It further reinforced the ownership of property as empowerment.^{xxv}

The play drawing the reader's attention towards the codes and customs which privilege men and undermined the position of women. Her women character highlights the oppressive customary patriarchal behaviour when she says, "His right is that he is a man who can stoop him?. Almighty god, *Shariat* and community have given him the right."

However, Jahan has not stopped here. Through interjection by the character *Fatima* she audaciously tried to explore, inform and explain to the readers the social contours of patriarchy. She says, "All those books that talks about women's role, have been written by men. The propagators of religion, the codifiers of *shariat*, formulating rules were men who wrote to suit their needs". Lastly, the play raises the need for action through the recourse of law. Moreover, she has also highlighted the economics and sexual politics of domestic servitude in *iftari*, (the breaking of fast).^{xxvi}

Though situated within the context of educational and social reform movement that provided an environment for subjecting social orthodoxies, Jahan's work marked a level of dissent. As a part of Progressive Writers' Movement, Jahan opened up the domestic world of

middle class Muslim women to public scrutiny. It foregrounded the social lives of Muslim families is an attempt to unpack and question the gendered assumptions that played out within domestic spaces.^{xxvii}

Since late 19th century, the construction of the role of ideal women propagated by reformers were seen as central to house hold economy and transmitter of culture, and potential purveyor of ethical values and religious codes. Moreover, their primary concern for emphasizing on women's education was merely in the interest of imposing domestic and religious duties, which reaffirmed the exploitative and restrictive role of women as prescribed by patriarchy.^{xxviii}

Similarly, with the intensification of anti-Colonial Nationalism, the middle class construction of nation and nationalism in the theoretical discourses, projected images of women as devoted wives, mothers, self sacrificing, enduring to retain the self identity of national culture and to challenge Colonialism.

Partha Chatterjee's insightful work maps a spatial dichotomy of home and world while writing about the Indian nationalism. Separation of 'private and public' spiritual and material, was the answer to the problem of how to retain self identity. He claims women's autonomous subjectivity is to be found in the domestic archives of home rather than the external domain of political conflict.^{xxix}

But in contrast, Rashid Jahan's stories treats similar special division in a strikingly different way where women do not necessarily adhere to the division. They cross boundaries not as autonomous subjectivity but as participants in a dialogic progress.^{xxx}

Her intellectual orientation marked a shift. This shift which propelled was from reform to radicalism. Her writings did not follow *Sita-Savitri* paradigm of Indian women, rather her women character stand up, showing defiance, resistance, strong willed, argumentative and assertive.^{xxxi} Through the form of conversation and exchange of anecdotes she had tried to critique reformist ideals, contradiction and hypocrisy.

She has configured the domestic interiors in such a way that these were not seen as spaces of confinement and restriction but becomes the site where debate and argument is possible.^{xxxii}

Her writings remind us of the courage with which it illustrated women's response to the world that nationalists, social reformers, feudal patriarchy had carved out for them and reconstructed for the public the social life and the politics of family and sexuality.^{xxxiii}

Through the platform of her plays and short stories, she tried to examine multiple and intersecting layers embedded in the histories of colonization, social reform movements, nationalist struggle, which also entered into the private domestic realm and affected women's lives in general.^{xxxiv}

REFERENCES:

- i Priambada Gopal, “*Literary Radicalism in India, Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*”, Rowt Ledge, London and New York, 2013, PP. 13-15; Rakshanda Jalil, ‘*A Rebel and Her Cause*’, women unlimited, Delhi, 2014, Introduction; Nandi Bhatia, “*Performing Women/Performing Womenhood*”, Oxford University Press, 2010, See Chap.2, Argumentive women in Domestic Spaces, PP 38-39.
- ii Rakshanda Jalil, ‘*A Literary History of the Progressive Writers’ Movement in Urdu*’, Oxford, 2014, PP 108-10, Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and her Cause*, op cit,(see Introduction) .
- iii Sajida Zubair and Carlo Coppola, *Rashid Jahan; Urdu Literatures First-Angry Young Women; Journal of South Asian Literature*, 1987; 22 (1), P. 167; Priambada Gopal, op cit, P-42; Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause*, op cit, P-20, see chap. 2; Shaikh Mohammad Abdullah’s Journal was preoccupied with the themes of social upliftment and call for far reaching improvements in all quarters of society.
- iv Khalid Alvi (ed.), *Angare*, Delhi Education Publishing House, 1995, P 102, Shakeel Siddiqui translated from the original, *Aaj Bhi Sulag Rahen Hai Chah Dastak Purane Angare*, Parimal Prakashan, Delhi, 1990, P-102; also see Priambada Gopal Op cit, P-16.
- v Khalid Alvi, *Angare Ka Tareekhi Pasmanzer aur Tarraqui Pasand Therik*, Educational Publishing House, 1995, P-104; also see Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and her cause*, Op cit, Pp.. 31-45; Sajida Zubair and Carlo Coppola Op cit, P 166-83.
- vi Priambada Gopal, Op cit, PP 16-18; Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause*; Op cit, Pp. 199-212; Nandi Bhatia Op cit; PP 49-50.
- vii Hamida Saiduzaffar, *Interview*, Journal of South Asian Literature, 1987; 22(11) Pp.158-65.
- viii Ibid; P 162.
- ix Priambada Gopal, Op cit, Pp. 41-42.
- x Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause*; Op cit; Pp. 45-46; Carlo Copplola and S. Zubair, Op cit, P. 170, Carlo Coppola, *The Angar Group: the infants terrible of Urdu literature in annual of Urdu studies*, Vol-1, 1981, P.61, translations of ‘*Behind the Veil*’ are from Ralph Russel, *Hidden in the Lute: An anthology of the two centuries of Urdu literature*, Delhi, veking, 1995. Pp. 34-46.
- xi Priyambada Gopal, Op cit, P-16.
- xii Mulkh Raj Anand, *on the Progressive Writers Movement* in Sudhi Pradhan (ed.) *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*, Vol-1, Calcutta, National Book Agency, 1979, Pp. 2-20; Priamabada Gopal, Op cit, P-15; Sajjad Zaheer *Yaadein ,translated Reminiscences*, in Sudhi Pradhan, Op cit; Ahmad Ali; and *South Asian Literature*, Pp. 35-36; Rakshanda Jalil, *Literary History of Progressive Writer’s Movement in Urdu*, Op cit, Pp. 192-93. *The Progressive Writers’ Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu*, in Carlo Cappola (ed;) *Marxist influences*.
- xiii Priambada Gopal; Op cit, PP 17-26, P-26; the genesis of the Progressive Writer’s Association can also be traced back to two desperate influences outside India as well , the Bloomsbury circle, with whom both Zaheer and Mulk Raj Anand had personal acquaintance and with the European group, International Writers for the Defense of culture, whose 1935 Congress in Paris they attended. Ralph Russel has pointed out that the Progressive Writer’s Association’s closeness to Nehru and other Nationalist figures did allow the organization a mainstream acceptance
- xiv Munshi Premchand, *The Nature and Purpose of literature*, in Sudhi Pradhan, Op cit; P 53; also see Priambada Gopal, Op cit, P 27; Premchand address translated by Francesco Orsini, the Oxford India Premchand, Oxford, 2004.
- xv Premchand, Op cit P-53; Priambada Gopal, Op cit P. 27.
- xvi Ibid.
- xvii Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause*, Op cit, P-84, 85.
- xviii Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause*, Op cit, P-85; also see Steven M; Poulos, *Rashid Jahan of Angare, ‘Her Life and Work,’*. Indian Literature, New Delhi, Sahitya Akadami.

-
- xix Ibid.
- xx Rakshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause*, Op cit, P-117; Priambada Gopal, Op cit, PP 44-47.
- xxi Ibid; PP-6
- xxii Rashid Jahan, ‘*That one*’ ‘*Woh*’, translated and edited, New Delhi, Shadakar Press, 1988, PP 118-122; Priambada Gopal, Op cit, PP 44-45; S. Tharu and R. Lalita, (ed.), *Introduction in women writing in India*, Vol.2 New York, Feminist Press.
- xxiii H. Saiduzaffar, Op cit, P 161; S Zubair and Carlo Cappola, Op cit, P-170.
- xxiv Priambada a Gopal, Op cit P-53.
- xxv Nandi Bhatia, Op cit, P-51.
- xxvi Ibid; Pp. 51-52.
- xxvii Ibid; P-52.
- xxviii Ibid; Pp. 52-53.
- xxix Priambada Gopal, Op cit, P-19, Partha Chatterjee, “*Nationalist Thought, and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*”, Minnesota University Press, 1986, P 43-45.
- xxx Priambada Gopal, Op cit, P-19,
- xxxi Ibid; PP 19-20.
- xxxii Nandi Bhatia, Op cit, Pp, 52-53.
- xxxiii Ibid; P-53.
- xxxiv Ibid; P-53.