

## **What Does It Mean to Be a Woman? Reading Rashid Jahan's "Behind The Veil"**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper intends to attempt a critical appraisal of Rashid Jahan's sole dramatic contribution "Behind the Veil" (*Parde Ke Peechhe*) in the collection *Angarey* (1932) and analyze how she exposed the myriad problems of the middle and lower-middle class women in Indian society. While her writings document her resentment against the status quo, at the same time they can be read as successful demonstrations of the fissures in the nationalist project. My paper will discuss how by presenting her female characters as political subjects with a sense of agency she has challenged the existing structures of family, religion, community, colonial domination, racism, and economic exploitation.

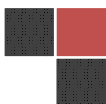
**Keywords:** Rashid Jahan, women, agency, nationalist project.

In addition to upsetting the self-proclaimed guardians of culture and inviting the earliest ban on free speech in the Indian subcontinent, *Angarey* (1932) heralded a new dawn in the world of Urdu literature, for it is widely considered to be the harbinger of the Progressive Writer's Association, the most noteworthy literary movement in colonial India. All the young contributors of the collection – Sajjad Zahir (1905- 1973), Ahmed Ali (1910-1993), Mahmuduzzafar (1908- 1954) and Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) – were subjected to vicious threats. But the most vicious attack was directed against Rashid Jahan, the sole female contributor of this collection. Though the conservative sect of the society decried her by calling *Angarewali*, for the progressives she was the epitome of emancipation, an inspiring public figure (Coppola & Zubair 170). Hailed as the first “angry young woman” of Urdu literature (Kazim 104) she, along with her *Angarey*-comrades, brought the forbidden into the terrain of Urdu literature – women, to be more precise domesticated women, their bodies, their woes – and questioned the gendering norms of society that sequestered women into lives of passivity. The present paper intends to attempt a critical appraisal of Jahan's sole dramatic contribution “Behind the Veil” (*Parde Ke Peechhe*) in the collection *Angarey* and analyze how she exposed the myriad problems of the middle and lower-middle class women in Indian society.

“Behind the Veil” takes us to the inner space of an upper-middle-class Muslim household – *zenana*, the sphere inhabited by women and unveils the happenings there. The stage direction sets the domestic atmosphere: “the walls around have many cupboards, shelves and ledges with different objects such as kitchen utensils, lids and covers” (Jahan 83) and here Mohammadi Begum, the protagonist of the play, laid bare her heart in front of the visitor in her household, Aftab Begum, and the audience/reader in turn. Being a helpless prisoner in the societal roles ascribed for women, Mohammadi Begum has been a passive sufferer at the hand of her indifferent husband. In a subtle manner, through Mohammadi Begum's tale of woe, Jahan touched upon various tabooed issues at one attempt: multiple marriages by men, abusive marriage, need for birth control, the fear of pregnancy, divorce and its threatening effect on women's lives, marital rape (Muhammadi Begum's husband insisted on sexual intercourse despite her illness and reluctance) – issues sensitive enough to raise the eyebrows of the sentinels of her contemporary society and earned her the name of an iconoclast. Interestingly, in the original edition, “Behind the Veil” (*Parde Ke Peechhe*), preceded Mahmudazzafar's contribution “Masculinity” (*Jawanmardi*), a short story that narrated the tragic story of an incompatible marriage, an insightful intervention on the gendered perspective. Priyamvada Gopal reads this pairing a “deliberate” act on Jahan's part:

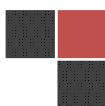
... [I]f [“Masculinity”] is an account of one man's relationship with his wife and the spatial geography of traditional conjugality, Rashid Jahan's “Behind the Veil” is a bitter rant by a married woman who lives her life in seclusion. [“Masculinity”] examines what it sees as the depredations of a predatory masculinism while “Behind the Veil” is an account of a victim's experience of oppressive domesticity. Together, the two texts attempt to chart, from different gendered perspectives, what Anthony Giddens has termed “the transformation of intimacy” within modernizing familial structures and changing gender relations (39).

The title of the drama itself deserves critical attention. The trope of veil has been the dominant one not only in the story, but also in the whole collection of *Angarey* as it endeavoured to unveil a sphere veiled from the gaze of society- the inner domain of a



respectable household, the spiritual domain of the nation where women, the gatekeepers of the nation's moral, spiritual and cultural superiority reside. By unveiling the domestic sphere Jahan ruptured the grand narrative of reformation that claimed to have emancipated the womenfolk of the nation. The "veil" in the title thus can be read as a conscious attempt on the part of the writer to reduce the binary between inner/outer, i.e. private/public, as her female protagonist unveils her mind to her confidante and thus touches upon various issues that remain veiled from the knowledge formation system – the issues of contraception, unhealthy sexual practices, breastfeeding etc. At another level, the story unveils the silence and mysticism that surrounds female body (Gopal 40), especially through the conversation between Muhammadi Begum and the lady doctor. Muhammadi is said to have been engulfed by chronic illness in spite of "doctors stand(ing) [in the household] at the ready, day or night" (Jahan 200). But with the lady doctor, there is no question of *pardah*: the lady doctor can examine Muhammadi Begum thoroughly, from "inside". This new patient-doctor intimacy somehow proves "enabling" for the patient as "it allows her to articulate a reflexive sense of her own physical, mental and emotional state. The body is no longer under erasure, an object of sexual use in sickness and in health, but integral to the woman's subjectivity" (Gopal 40). Rashin Jahan is said to have written this drama just after her medical training was completed at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. Being among the first generation of women in India who were privileged to get medical training, Rashid Jahan engaged herself with the problematic "issues of scientific and secular thought in relation to the female body" (Gopal 40-41). Her medical training, like the lady doctor of the drama, takes her not only inside of the inner domain of home but also inside the female body. A firm believer in socialism, Jahan refused to play the role of an apolitical doctor and called for gender justice through her writings: "She was quite aware early in life of social injustice and the sickness of society. As a practical person, the diagnosis was not enough for her; she wanted a treatment, a cure" (Saiduzzafar 162). And "Behind the Veil" can be read as a bold attempt at this direction, as the text can be read "as much an object lesson to herself and her fellow women doctors as it was a dramatic "documentary" expose of the evils of feudal patriarchy" (Gopal 40-41).

Women have always been a favourite subject with the literary practitioners down the ages. But this preoccupation with the "Woman's Question" gets all the more reinforced at the age of Reformation. The form of drama was perhaps the most affected one and reinforcing the status quo the dramas of the age reiterated the dominant trope of womanhood: the female characters resembled the self-sacrificing, all enduring women who acted in the interest of others. For example, we can mention some North Indian popular plays of that time such as *Puran Nath Jogi* (1925) by Puran Singh (1882-1932), and *Puran Bhagat* (1920), *Savitri* (1925), *Sukanya* (1925) by Brij Lal Shastri (1894-1968). Almost every play in this dramatic tradition was based on classical myths and legends and reinforced the spirit of contemporary secular nationalism that was busy constructing the womenfolk of the nation after the image of classical womanhood. Jahan's literary works are more a subversion of the dominant tradition than a reiteration of it – it is her spirit of dissident that earned her the status of a radical among her contemporaries. Taking the domestic space as her subject matter she endeavoured to unveil it, to bring it to scrutiny and confront the regressive social institutions that affected the lives of women. Taking impetus from the contemporary social and educational reform movements and in accordance with the aphorism propagated by the All India Progressive Writers'



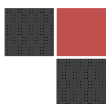
Association (PWA) of which she was a lifelong member, Jahan interrogated the orthodoxies, gendered double standard of her contemporary social lives.

Though Jahan is remembered nowadays mainly for her short stories, it is her dramatic works that carried the bulk of her radical thoughts. She “wrote and directed several plays, including adaptations of works by Anton Chekov, Premchand, and James Joyce, and moved back to fiction only when failing health and lack of time restricted her involvement in the theatre” (Tharu and Lalitha 119). Perhaps she found the conversational form of the theatre more suitable than the short stories to convey her voice of dissent. All the more, the characters of her dramatic works served as her mouthpieces as they conveyed the point of view of their creator and “... assume the power to comment on and bring alive for their readers/audience the lived experiences of women” like child marriage, arranged marriage, unwanted pregnancies etc and “connect these individualized issues to the public domain of politics wherein the debates on reform were taking place” (Bhatia 36). This cry for reformation was the dominant one among her contemporary intelligentsia, as Nandi Bhatia points out (ibid). Political organizations like All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC), All-India Muslim Women’s League (AIMWL) came into being. And in the literary-cultural front, there was AIPWA and the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). Nurtured into this atmosphere, Jahan

Instead of celebrating the achievements of middle-class women who were contributing to the revolutionary potential of political and nationalist movements and organizations, Jahan ... chose to focus on aspects of women’s lives that remain mystified by being relegated to the realm of the private, thus adding a crucial dimension to activists’ concern with freedom, political independence and anti-colonial resistance (Bhatia 37).

Unlike the female characters of her contemporary North Indian plays, Jahan’s characters retorted against the social conservatism prevailed then and transformed their domestic space of restriction-oppression-confinement into a space of debate and argumentation within their limited capacity.

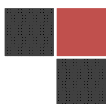
A firm believer in Premchand’s definition of literature as “criticism of life” (Jalil 85) Jahan’s writings can be seen as responses to the dominant cultural constructions of her time. Bhatia has advised the readers “to return to the literary, social, nationalists, and colonial contexts” of her time “in order to evaluate” her “contributions to a women-cantered drama” (40). Almost the entire nation was affected by the tide of social reformist fervour. If the reformist initiative in Punjab was taken up by *Arya Samaj*; in Bengal there was *Brahmo Samaj*. Though divided by language and religious impetus, these reformist institutions had one thing in common— their preoccupation with the woman’s question. While advocating the need for women’s education (in order to make them better wives and mother), these institutions engaged themselves with various tabooed issues like infant marriage, arranged marriage, age of consent, widow remarriage, wife immolation etc. which has said to provide impetus to the feminist movements of the later generations. The Muslim sect of society was also affected by this reformist fervour. While Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1869- 1935) wrote *Huquq un- Niswan* (1898), a treatise in defence of women’s rights in Islamic law, Shaikh Abdullah and Waheed Jahan Begum (Jahan’s parents) founded a separate school for girls in Aligarh in 1906, which was “supported by aristocratic and government subventions” and was “committed to supervision and *purdah* to win the support of the elite” (Metcalf 11). Jahan is said to have inherited her reformist spirit from



her social reformer parents. All the more, nurtured within the liberal atmosphere of her home, Jahan and her younger sister Begum Khursheed Mirza enjoyed some privileges denied to the other women of their time, they actively participated in cultural activities like acting, singing, composing and directing plays, one of which was performed at the Annual Aligarh Exhibition in 1928, as Khursheed recollected in her memoir (Kazim 13). Jahan was introduced to the vast repertoire of women's journal in Urdu like *Khatun*, *Ismat*, and *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan* by her mother Waheed Jahan Begum (Jalil 15). Another guiding star of her fortune was Miss Hazra, the headmistress of her school who made her acquainted with a world completely unknown to her – the world of revolution and activism – Home Rule, *swadeshi*, the Partition of Bengal and its aftermath as well as the literary works by Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra (ibid). Rashid Jahan referred to these liberating influences thus: “We slept on the mattresses of women's education and covered ourselves with the quilt of women's education from our earliest consciousness” (Saiduzzafar 1). And no wonder that in her later life she could easily identify herself with the dominant political issues of her time – communism, feminism, nationalism, and secularism (Jalil 15).

Throughout her life, Rashid Jahan has remained an enigmatic figure who has made her individuality felt in every sphere of her life. So how can she abide by the reformist ideologies espoused by her reformist father and the other Muslim reformers like Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan? Being a true visionary she could make out the limitations of the reformatory projects which were nothing but “an attempt to foster a productive alliance between upper-class Muslims in North India and the Colonial government” (Gopal 43). They prioritized women's education to improve the “domestic and religious duties to the benefit of all” (Metcalf 11). She was also conscious of the fact that though “Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Chirag Ali had addressed [various] women's issues [in their reformist projects] the emancipation of women while being important, was given a secondary priority” (Moaddel 116). And it was this realization that made her discard the path of reformation and lead her towards the path of radicalism (Bhatia 47). This attempt on her part to move beyond the limited critique of gender question made her address those questions throughout her writing career. And to express those iconoclastic ideas of her, Jahan used the form of one-act play, a form particularly favourite with literary practitioners during the early decades of the twentieth century. Though an ancient art form, it became popular and modernized at the hand of Bharatendu Harishchandra and took the shape of social satire, a historical drama with nationalist fervour and mythological plays. But for Jahan, its utility lies in its brevity, as Bhatia contends “in order to convey [her] viewpoints effectively in a short space of time, [she] resorted to the one-act play” (48). This genre was particularly appealing to the progressive writers “because of its ability to communicate the point in a short span of time” (Bhatia 49). In May 1938 Premchand devoted an entire issue of his journal *Hans* to this genre of one-act play. It was also budget-friendly, as “it required fewer characters, smaller budgets, and smaller time frames to present problems and solutions, it was also mobile, which facilitated its performance in various cities, towns, and villages for on-literature audiences” (Bhatia 49). Being compatible with their project of social realism, this genre of one-act play was not only popular with the progressive writers but also with the artists of IPTA. And Jahan, being determined to capture the realist picture of her contemporary Muslim middle-class society found this literary genre most compatible with her literary goals.

In her brief writing career Jahan is said to have written 15-20 plays along with short stories. Perhaps her professional responsibilities as a doctor, her political



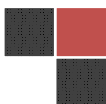
commitment to the Communist party, her active participation in Progressive Writer's Association and her failing health and untimely death came into her way. But she defied time with the profound variety of themes. And it is her commitment to realism that earned her a permanent status in the ambit of Urdu literature. It is her unflinching feminist voice of dissent that marked her apart from her contemporaries. Portraying her women characters as political agents, she presented a critique against the oppressive socio-political-cultural apparatuses of her society. But the most severe critique perhaps was directed against the institution of marriage itself. Jahan was prudent enough to recognize the phallogocentric nature of the institution of marriage and it has been her constant target of criticism. "Behind the Veil" is also no exception. Set in the feminine sphere of home, the play depicted the plight of a wife, a mother who has to lead a cloistered, secluded life with no one to listen to her pangs of cries except for her female relative, who also is her confidant. But her subjugated position has not been able to rob her of her sense of agency. Like all the other female protagonists of Jahan's oeuvre, she acted as her creator's mouthpiece and raised her finger against the oppressive social intuitions of her society. She was bold enough to call her unwanted pregnancy a "problem" (Jahan 86) and expose her husband's obsession with sex thus:

As far as he is concerned, all pleasure is limited to his own lust. His only worry is that he will be inconvenienced if a child stays with me. He is not concerned, be it night or day. All he wants is for his wife to be available to him at all times. And, of course, he does not stop at his wife. There is absolutely no holding him back from going to other places too (Jahan 88).

Hence, Jahan subverted the nationalist project of upholding the home as the epitome of the nation's cultural superiority and exposed the oppressive nature of this domain that said to have protected women from the perils from outside. Presenting the domestic space as a space of debate, Jahan has depicted the discrepancy between the lived experiences of women and the reality experienced by them.

Indifferent, rather insensitive husbands abound in Jahan's fictional world. Almost all of her memorable writings are weaved around an insensitive husband and his dissenting wife. Jahan's other contribution in *Angarey*, "Trip to Delhi" (*Dilliki Sair*) is also a reiteration of the same theme, exploiting the same narrative technique. The female protagonist of the short story Mallika Begum is narrating her experience of a train journey from Faridabad to Delhi. The entire female neighbourhood has broken into her quarter as she was the first among them to experience such privilege. Her educated husband has taken to a trip to Delhi only to leave alone her on the platform with luggage while he went to his meet his friend. When he returned after nearly two hours, he asked his wife in a callous tone: "Should I get some pooris or something else if you are hungry? Will you eat? I have already eaten in the hotel" (Jahan 52). But what deserves to be mentioned is Mallika Begum's reply to her husband: "For God's sake, take me home. I've had enough of this outing, enough! I know now that I should refuse even a visit to heaven with you. Oh, what a great trip you've brought me on!?" (ibid). This voice of protest gets cruder in "Behind the Veil" as Poor Muhammadi Begum vents out her frustration thus:

... [M]y uterus, as well as my lower parts, had begun to slide down. It needed to be corrected so that my mian could get the pleasure of a new wife from my body. Bua, how long can the body of a woman who produces children year after year





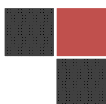
remain fit? It slipped down again. Then once again I was slaughtered with force and threat. But despite all this, he is still unhappy (Jahan 100).

By portraying her protagonist as a victim of her sexuality, the institute of marriage and its compulsions on women, Jahan presented a “subversive litany of the wrongs that men do and women endure” (Gopal 40). Khurshid Jahan explains: “[The play] underscores men’s utter disregard for the women in their lives and describes accurately the goings-on in the middle-class Muslim household of the 1930s” (Kazim 101).

Women, more specifically Muslim women, and their plights at the hand of patriarchy has been the central tenet in Jahan’s oeuvre. She is said to have used her writings to convey her political messages, thus devoting “much of her talent to the thematic structure and content of her stories and considerably less attention to characters” (Poulos 116). Starting in medias res, Jahan’s writings can be seen as the fictionalized accounts of her political ideologies, thus leaving her little scope for character development. Yet her pen has painted a number of memorable characters like Muhammadi Begum, Mallika Begum, Fatima who have refused to yield their free spirit to the atrocious agents of patriarchy and emerge triumphantly. The enlightened atmosphere of her home and the early exposure to the political ideals of feminism and socialism lead her to write on “the brutality and oppression in all its starkness, her writings remained focused on women” (Bano 65). Her professional training as a gynaecologist and obstetrician made her come in close contact with the women of various classes, ages, religions and thus provide her the much-needed firsthand experience of the gendered body of women. The themes of gender, body, and sexuality constantly intertwine with the discourses on class-based oppression and marginalization and other coordinates of identity-caste and religion to generate a range of animosities (Gopal 60). By intermingling the question of gender with a range of contemporary issues she has drawn our attention to several issues like freedom, justice, and choices that still remained unsettling in the twenty-first century. While her writings document her resentment against the status quo, at the same time they can be read as successful demonstrations of the fissures in the nationalist project. By presenting her female characters as political subjects with a sense of agency she has challenged the existing structures of family, religion, community, colonial domination, racism, and economic exploitation (Gopal 58). Her works may not have the mark of greatness, but their socio-cultural significance and impact on the literature of the later generations cannot be denied. Unfortunately, she has been relegated to a marginal position in the canon of Urdu literature and only remembered as *Angarewali*, and it is time to revisit her legacy both for its humanistic and its individualistic appeal. Her greatest achievement is perhaps her visionary quality and sincerity that she passed on to her firebrand successors, Ismat Chughtai being the most prominent among them.

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