

Banned Literature: *Angaaray* (1932) and the Vision for Independent India

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Abstract

In March 1933, on the behest of Muslim fundamentalist organizations in colonial India, the British government banned an Urdu short-story collection (9 short stories and 1 play) called *Angaaray* (1932; lit. burning coals), by four young writers, Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan, and Mahmuduzzafar, who were all in their twenties. *Angaaray* was a radical work of literature in the short history of the Urdu short story that began in 1908 with Premchand's first collection of short stories *Soz-e-Watan* (dirge of the nation). *Angaaray* attempted to radically alter the terrain of Urdu literature by proposing the need to eschew any belief in the hierarchy of representation in literature, that is, it is one of the first attempts in Urdu literature to allow the unfettered representation of any subject of literature, even God, without any need for reverence or respect. *Angaaray* attempted to point the way to the future of independent India, and dealt with subjects that were considered taboo and blasphemous, including discussions of God and his corruptibility, patriarchy, women's sexuality and their bodies, poverty, and the like. *Angaaray*, in many respects, directly led to the formation of the Progressive Writers' Association in 1936, whose writers in later years dealt with the same themes as *Angaaray*. This paper attempts to read the stories of *Angaaray* from a Rancierian lens, to suggest that by demolishing the idea of the hierarchies of representation in literature, of what can and cannot be spoken of in a democracy, *Angaaray* attempts to partake in the true task of "politics" according to the specific definition of the term by Jacques Ranciere. I will explore how the stories tried to chart the way for the ideals that independent India should aspire for, and set the stage for the formation of the Progressive Writers' Association.

Keywords: dissensus, progressive, *Angaaray*, ranciere, hierarchy

The beginnings of the Urdu short story (known as the *mukhtasar afsana* in Urdu) were relatively late in comparison to other forms of literature, including the novel, poetry or drama. While the first Urdu novel made its appearance in the late nineteenth century, with contesting claims about who the first novelist was, whether it was Nazir Ahmed (1830–1912), Ratan Nath Sarshar (1846–1902), Abdul Halim Sharar (1860–1926), or Muhammad Hadi Rusva (1858–1931), there was, as Muhammad Asaduddin argues, an already rich tradition of storytelling, apart from the simple importation of Western genres

(Asaduddin, "First Urdu Novel" 83). This rich tradition of storytelling in Urdu and Persian, in the form of *dastans* or *qissas*, simply a tale or a story, in the arrangement of medieval romances with supernatural overtones, became, in some senses, the fundamental building blocks upon which the developments of the Urdu short story occurred. The first Urdu short stories are usually credited to Munshi Premchand's five-story collection (1880–1936) *Soz-e-Watan* (Dirge of the Nation) in 1908/1909 (Asaduddin believes it to be 1908, while G.C. Narang dates it to 1909) (Asaduddin, "Introduction" 24; Narang 113). Surprisingly, *Soz-e-Watan*, like the book *Angaarey* that will be the main object of our discussion, is also notably the first of Premchand's works to have been banned by the British government. The beginnings of the Urdu short story, therefore, are, in some ways, representative of the subversive nature of the Urdu short story, in particular, with regards to its themes and objects of discussion. This characteristic rebelliousness of the Urdu short story will be taken up in this paper when discussing the works of four young authors—Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Ahmed Ali, and Mahmuduzzafar—who were all in their twenties at the time of publication who together penned the highly inflammatory and contested work *Angaarey* (1932; lit. Burning coals).

Before we discuss the nature of *Angaarey* and the reason for it being banned by the British government in 1933, it is pertinent to understand the literary tradition set up by Premchand's *Soz-e-Watan* for future works of the Urdu *afsana*. *Soz-e-Watan*, being the earliest experiment in the Urdu short story, could not rid itself of the elements of the exceptional large body of Perso-Arabic literature that existed centuries before it. Christina Oesterheld also believes that the tradition that Urdu literature drew from, especially after the 1830s, were translated works of "Persian *qissas* and Perso-Arabic moral tales, of stories from the *Arabian Nights*, stories about the prophet Muhammad and his companions, collections of witticisms (*lata'if*), short anecdotes, and fables (*naqlen, naqlat, naqliyat*) of humorous, amatory or nature (originally based often on Sanskrit sources like the *Shukasaptati*)" (Oesterheld 171). The presence of supernatural elements and stories of lovers and their travails formed a large part of the earliest works of prose of Urdu literature in the nineteenth century, and Premchand himself could not rid these elements immediately from the early Urdu short story. What he did manage to do, however, was merge the romance elements with some proto-nationalistic attitudes, which was perhaps the reason for the collection being banned by the British government. For example, the story "Duniya ka Sabse Anmol Ratan" ("The Rarest Pearl in the World") of his collection follows the same tradition of the romance of Perso-Arabic tales, of a lover Dilfigar who is asked by the Queen Dilfareb to bring to her the "the most priceless jewel" (Asaduddin, *Premchand* 55), and only then will she be his. After many failed attempts, which include meetings with supernatural beings and fictional settings, Dilfigar ends up in the real world of Hindustan in search of this object and meets a fallen Rajput soldier, who is going to die soon and realizes that this soldier has shed his blood for his motherland and that the "last drop of blood shed for the freedom of one's country is the most precious gem in the world" (Asaduddin, *Premchand* 63). Premchand merges the fantastical with the real by using the age-old model of the *dastan* with the earliest articulations of a national allegiance in Urdu literature. This proto-nationalism of the first Urdu short stories set the Urdu *afsana* on the path to a more radical expression of the issues that plague the colonized land of Hindustan till the period of Indian Independence.

Premchand's vision also becomes amply clear in the preface to *Soz-e-Watan* when he says:

The literature of every *qaum* (community/nation) is the real picture of that time. The thoughts which go in their mind and the emotions which take place in their hearts can be seen in the prose and poetry, like someone's face in the mirror... In our country, we badly need books which imprint patriotism in the hearts of the new generation (Premchand qtd. in Alam).

This patriotism is not merely for political independence but also a realization of the larger social reform required to make future independent India a place free from social ills and practices. Premchand's later writings on caste, communalism, and the impulse for social reform become building blocks for future writers to use to articulate their personal visions of what independent India should be like.

***Angaaray* and the Anger against It**

In December 1932, a slim collection of nine short stories and one play called *Angaaray* (lit. burning coals or embers) was published by four young authors, all in their twenties, and also relatively unknown in the literary scene—Sajjad Zaheer (who wrote five stories), Ahmed Ali (two stories), Rashid Jahan (one story and one play), and Mahmuduzzafar (one story). This small collection that dealt with social, religious, and political issues created a furore amongst the hard-line Muslim fundamentalists, and the book was not in circulation for long as the British government banned it in March of 1933 after protests by Muslims, both fundamentalists and organizations. An article in the *Hindustan Times* in 1933 quoted the Central Standing Committee of the All-India Shia Conference that had called upon the British government to ban the book because the “heart-rending and filthy pamphlet called Aangarey (sic)” that ridiculed “God and his Prophet which is extremely objectionable from the standpoint of both religion and morality” had “wounded ... [the] feelings of the entire Muslim community” (qtd. in Shingavi viii). The *Medinah*, which was published from Bijnor, wrote in an article on 13 February 1933:

We could not find in them [the stories in *Angaaray*] any thing intellectually modern except immorality, evil character and wickedness. To mock at the creator of the world, to ridicule religious beliefs and to make indecent jokes are the main characteristics of this bundle of filth. There is no regard for the greatness and majesty of God nor any respect for the sanctity and honour of prophets, nor any respect for human dignity. Instead one finds a bold display of every kind of foul language (qtd. in Mahmud 449).

It further called it a “fuhash aur malhadanah kitaab” (pornographic and atheistic book) (Mahmud 449), highlighting that there was supposedly no literary merit to the book apart from engaging in sensationalism and attempting to pander to the basest of human impulses.

The editor of an Urdu weekly called *Sach*, Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi, in an article on 24 February 1933, criticized *Angaaray* for its “dirty bazari language and cheap and low style of narration with vulgar insinuation against religion which despite much accuracy yields no literary beauty” (qtd. in Jalil 169). Another article in *Sach* charged the book of lacking any literary value, blamed its “low thinking, vulgar and cheap

arguments”, and that the stories, from the viewpoint of literature, were completely “senseless and worthless” (qtd. in Jalil 169). This attack on the literary worth of *Angaaray* was also made to render it useless in the literary public sphere to prevent any promotion of the book by the “bad” press it was getting in case someone had not heard of it.

The book also received political and judicial condemnation and the publisher, Mirza Mohammad Jawad of the Nizami Press, was forced to declare in court that his act of publishing *Angaaray* caused much anguish and resentment and that he should apologize for his actions (Chauhan and Alvi xviii). Finally, under immense political pressure, the British government banned *Angaaray* under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code on 15 March 1933. The section read:

Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of His Majesty’s subjects, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both (qtd. in Mahmud 450).

Angaaray faced the ire of not only Muslim religionists but also the full might of the censorship of the British government, which burnt all the copies except for a few copies, five of which were kept with the Keeper of Records in New Delhi and two in London as was the rule for such offences (Mahmud 450).

After *Angaaray* was banned, Mahmuduzzafar, one of the writers, wrote an article defending *Angaaray* around 20 days later, on 5 April 1933, called “In Defence of Angarey: Shall We Submit to Gagging?” which was published in *The Leader* (Allahabad). The article was written by Mahmuduzzafar but was signed by all the other writers. It stated:

... Nobody can deny the truthfulness of those [the stories] portraits, and anyone who chooses to exert himself can see that they are not drawn for the sake of literary “flair”, but spring from an inner indignation against the “sorry scheme of things.”

The authors of this book do not wish to make any apology for it. They leave it to float or sink of itself. They are not afraid of the consequences of having launched it. They only wish to defend “the right of launching it and all other vessels like it”—they stand for the right of free criticism and free expression in all matters of the highest importance to the human race in general and the Indian people in particular. They have chosen the particular field of Islam, not because they bear it “any” special malice, but because, being born into that particular Society, they felt themselves better qualified to speak for that alone. They were more sure of their ground there. Whatever happens to the book or to the authors, we hope that others will not be discouraged. Our practical purpose is the formation immediately of a League of Progressive authors, which should bring forth similar collections from time to time, both in English and the various vernaculars of our country (qtd. in Shinghavi 166).

Mahmuduzzafar locates *Angaaray* as a precursor to what he eventually refers to as “Progressive” writing and writers, which in the years to come soon led to the formation of the Progressive Writers’ Association in 1936. However, this paper shall argue that the term “Progressive” that the *Angaaray* quartet claim for future writers and themselves is perhaps a term which does not do justice to the method of writing that they employ and is more of a general term that does not clearly articulate what *Angaaray* was all about. I argue that *Angaaray* was not merely an attempt at a particular kind of writing, which Priyamvada Gopal calls “literary radicalism” (Gopal 10), but rather suggest that the mode of writing that *Angaaray* tries to inaugurate is better understood through the lens of the philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s term “dissensus” in his discussions of politics and aesthetics. Dissensus is a more loaded term that deals with specific ways of being, saying, and doing rather than simply referring to something as progressive, which is perhaps a term that does not have access to a sense of atemporality that is available in “dissensus” since progress is temporal and what can be considered to be progress at a particular point of time does not necessarily seem progressive at a later stage. I shall argue through the discussions of some stories from *Angaaray* that Ranciere’s usage of terms such as dissensus allows a more nuanced understanding of the complexities that *Angaaray* attempts to bring to their understanding of what independent India should be.

Ranciere’s Understanding of Politics and Aesthetics

Jacques Ranciere’s (b. 1940) take on politics and aesthetics is markedly different from most contemporary discourses on what constitutes politics and aesthetics. Ranciere appropriates terms such as politics, aesthetics, police, consensus, and democracy and infuses them with meanings that are different from regular usages. Ranciere’s philosophy of dissensus, of which politics and aesthetics are examples, can be understood by his own definition of it, rather than the mere simple meaning of ‘disagreement’. Ranciere says in “Thinking Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics” that dissensus is “at the most abstract level ... a difference between sense and sense: a difference within the same, a sameness of the opposite” (Rancière, “Thinking Dissensus” 1). Dissensual activity, whether through politics or aesthetics, is, in a sense, an exercise of worlding, of highlighting the divisions in the world that is the given social order. It is an act of manifestation, where dissensus exposes the world that is hidden by the social hierarchies that govern us. It is about bringing to light that which remains hidden and occluded and exposing the police orders that define specific ways of being for specific roles, and specific skills for saying specific things. In essence, dissensus is not simply a dissent or disagreement of different ideas and ideologies; as Ranciere says, it is “the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself” (Rancière, “Ten Theses” 38). As Joseph Tanke clearly elucidates:

Dissensus rejects the apportionments of the already ordained community in which some are held not to exist by creating a new common world wherein one demonstrates his ability to understand, speak, and critique the oppressor’s language. For Rancière, politics consists of creating the spaces and times in which those ordinarily thought to be unequal demonstrate their equality (Tanke 64).

The act of dissensus, through politics and aesthetics, therefore, attempts to bring to the fore those parts of the social order of the population who are intentionally invisibilized from voicing their opinions in the special hierarchy that only allows some people to

articulate themselves or take on roles of governance. Traditional politics, as Rancierian explains in his “Ten Theses on Politics”, is linked with the lifestyle of a particular subject, one who has “a way of life ‘specific’ to political existence” (Rancière, “Ten Theses” 28), who is privileged to make a political utterance; the rest of the voices are occluded from participation in the political sphere. Through Rancierian dissensus, the task of true politics is, as he says in thesis 3 of his “Ten Theses on Politics”, “a specific break with the logic of the *arkhe*. It does not simply presuppose a break with the ‘normal’ distribution of positions that defines who exercises power and who is subject to it. It also requires a break with the idea that there exist dispositions ‘specific’ to these positions” (Rancière, “Ten Theses” 30). By the logic of the *arkhe*, Rancière means that there are separate divisions of who is ruled and who the rulers are in a political setup (Chambers 64). Political dissensus in the Rancierian sense attempts to highlight that there are no special persons or skills for political positions of the ruler and that the true essence of democracy is that there are no qualifications required to rule or make a political utterance—a power which is vehemently denied by the oligarchic social order to the masses and the invisibilized. Rancierian politics attempts to allow those parts of the population which are denied the power of politics to make their utterances despite their occlusion. Rancierian politics is an attempt to rupture the given social order, merge the private and the public, unhide the hidden and expose the faultlines in a system which believes it is whole and complete.

While politics in the Rancierian sense is about unearthing the hidden and uncounted of the social order and visibilizing their existence and allowing them speech after enforced silence, Rancierian aesthetics is governed by a similar equality principle, what he calls the “regime of arts” in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004). Rancière sees in the history of art three regimes that function, consisting of principles and rules that administer the formation of the work of art. The three regimes that Rancière defines in the history of art are the ethical regime, the representative regime, and the aesthetic regime. The ethical regime, based on ideas of art from Plato’s *The Republic*, does not consider art as art but it is “subsumed under the question of images” (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 20), that is, about how faithful it is to the original object of representation and also is concerned with the ethical implications of this work on the individual or the community. Therefore, in this regime, the function of art is directed towards the question of education and how it assists in the growth of the moral community. The second regime, the representative regime, is focused on the poetic image (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 21–2) and questions of truthful imitation based on the principles of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Artworks in this regime are governed by principles of truthful imitation; adherence to the “principle of genericity” (Rockhill 21), that is, the proper modes of representation of different members of society, for example, noblemen in tragedies and members of the lower classes through comedies; and also the efficaciousness of the speech act to instruct the audience through the action that is depicted about the correct modes of living their real life. In a sense, the representative regime attempts to link the *poiesis*, or the ways of making, with the *aisthesis*, or its effects. The final regime that Rancière talks about is the aesthetic regime, where the governing principles of the works of art—of what can and cannot be represented, the correct representations of social hierarchies, and the end aims of the work of art—are dismantled to allow art an autonomy from these principles. It is a rejection of the ways of making and the effect and freeing art from the narrow compartmentalization of genres and effects and allowing art

the ability to decide “what art makes and what makes art” (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 25). This is the true task of Rancierian aesthetics; to separate it from any rules and strictures that govern how it functions and represent things as it wishes, without being concerned about social propriety. It, therefore, functions with a principle of indifference, where art is free from discourses of hierarchies and styles of language for specific classes of people.

The Politics and Aesthetics of Angaaray

This section will attempt to read a few stories of *Angaaray* to show how the writers did not simply attempt to inculcate radicalism or modernism in their stories but rather attempted to make the discourse of literature freer from the didacticism that characterized Urdu prose in the nineteenth century, especially the novels of writers such as Nazir Ahmed, and Urdu poetry of people like Muhammad Iqbal in the twentieth century. *Angaaray* attempts to inaugurate a mode of indifferent and irreverent writing that believed in the uninhibited display of socio-political and religious issues in the literary public sphere without the need for self-censorship on sensitive topics of religion, sexuality, and the like. *Angaaray*, therefore, tries to embody an idea of a democracy-to-come, where there should be absolute freedom to discuss issues freely without paying reverence to hierarchies of representation and biases, and thinking of the future India as a place where there are no set, pre-determined ways of being, saying, and doing.

Angaaray faced extreme anger because of the way it represented religious iconography and figures and its complete disregard for propriety when discussing and depicting God, the angels, Satan, and the clergy of the Islamic faith. Sajjad Zaheer’s story “Can’t Sleep” (“Neend Nahi Aati”) follows the protagonist-poet Akbar’s ruminations who cannot fall asleep and is pondering over the issues of his life. He is a disillusioned man angry at his friends and employer. Recounting an episode of Mahatma Gandhi’s rally to his servant, he tells of a time he rejected requests for a patriotic poem. He goes on to think over events of his life, including a brothel that he visited where he strangled a prostitute, Munni Jan, who had mocked his wife. The last scenes are visions of hell where Munni Jan, who is punished by having two snakes suckling at her breasts, tells him about God’s justice. He, too, has his visions of hell and eventually comes back to real life where he feels pangs of hunger.

The story is written in a stream of consciousness mode, one of the first attempts of such in the Urdu short story under the influence of writers like James Joyce. The episodes of memory of Mahatma Gandhi that he recalls are not focused on Gandhi’s speeches but rather on the rain during Gandhi’s lecture. He thinks of the rain as “Nature is pissing” (Zaheer 5), which is a simple but sharp criticism of Urdu literature’s obsession with nature romanticism, which Zaheer believes is given importance over real-world issues of poverty, hunger, and strife. It is *Angaaray*’s attempt to override the old methods of the depiction of nature in respectful terms and inaugurate the newer, irreverent aesthetic regime of Ranciere. This so-called mal-treatment is highlighted in the story in the way Zaheer discusses the episode of God and Munni Jan. Munni Jan in her vision of hell is punished by God with two snakes suckling at her breasts. However, she recounts to Akbar that a “subinspector” informs her that God’s “divine government” (Zaheer 16) has ordered that she be punished with five scorpions at her breasts. Munni Jan asks for leniency from the subinspector, who suggestively strokes her cheeks and she is informed to wait till God’s meeting is over. She goes on to state:

[T]he boss himself, came close to me. He had a full, white beard and flawless complexion. He looked at me and smiled. He then took me by the hand and entered the room nearby. Huzoor, I was completely bewildered ... but huzoor, he had aged only as far as his looks were concerned. I have not seen such a masculine and virile man in the whole world' (Zaheer qtd. in Chauhan and Alvi 36-7).

Zaheer's story has extremely problematic connotations that the hard-line fundamentalists took offence to. His story shows God and His kingdom as a corruptible bureaucratic system where God is anthropomorphized, and has the same human tendencies of lust and desire, a belief which also goes against the grains of Islamic thought that does not allow the representation of God in human terms. God himself is corruptible and his secret meeting with Munni Jan where her punishment is reduced has extremely suggestive sexual connotations, almost clearly highlighting that God engaged in sexual favours to reduce Munni Jan's sentence. Akbar also states in a part of the story: "These women will scream and squeal then [On Judgment Day] just like they do now, and they will flirt, and they will wink ... and they will wink so much that even poor God will stroke his beard in arousal' (Zaheer 13). God is shown to be a man full of lust who metes out problematic justice. The punishment is also not a bane but a boon for those who are willing to satisfy his sexual desires, as Munni says, "But instead of the scorpions I got two snakes that suckle at my breasts ... it's not painful at all, it's actually enjoyable" (Zaheer 18).

It becomes clear from Zaheer's portrayal of God and his ways of functioning that he does not believe in the need to educate through literature, nor does he think there is a need for propriety in representation. The earliest Urdu novels, such as Nazir Ahmed's *The Penitence of Nasooh* and the like, highlighted the fact that God's justice is pure, just, and infallible and the stories were attempts to educate the reader about Islamic principles and ways of life; here, however, we see that the Zaheer's representation does not believe in the generic principle of the representative regime that Ranciere discusses. There is no connection between the *poesis* and the *aisthesis* for Zaheer, and his story suggests that literature does not necessarily need to be subservient to the task of education or didacticism. "Can't Sleep" is one of the first stories in the history of modern Urdu literature that thinks of the spiritual hierarchy in irreverent terms, a trait that the literature before it in Urdu did not possess.

This is also the case in Ahmed Ali's first story in the collection called "A Night of Winter Rains". The story, also written in the first-person stream of consciousness mode, is of a mother, Mariyam, and her three children who live in a house that is almost in a dilapidated condition with rain pouring in from the roof. In the story, Mariyam thinks about her earlier life where she lived in sheer luxury and opulence, and has now been reduced to poverty. In the background, her hungry children are crying out for food and feebly attempting to shade themselves from the leaking rooftop. Mariyam, however, is lost in her thoughts and recounts her earlier life before her husband died and is angry at God and suggests that she would rather go with Satan on Doomsday because at least there will be some hope for salvation from the ignorance she feels in her present life from God.

Similar to Zaheer's protagonist Akbar, Mariyam voices her anger with God's wisdom and justice who has abandoned her and her three children. She believes that God is "just

an excuse, just a con” and that religion is simply “a fool’s wisdom” and “a roadblock on the path of progress” (Ali 97). Unlike Zaheer, however, Ali does not seem to engage in a suggestion of impropriety and places Satan directly in higher esteem than God. For Mariyam, Satan is perhaps the saviour, who she pins her hopes on for her lost soul: “A doomsday is upon us. It’s the time of ‘My soul, my soul’, the ruckus of the angel of resurrection, and the Antichrist is trying to seduce everyone. I am only going to go to him. I have hope, at least” (Ali 103). Again, we see that the spiritual hierarchy is inverted—God is of no use, he is the traitor and deceiver who invisibilizes the suffering of the poor and is “cruel and extremely unjust” (Ali 96). Like Zaheer, Ali, too, takes a swipe at the tendency of literature to hold on to age-old beliefs and modes of representation, and rather believes that literature is the medium that should allow complete expressivity on subjects that remain out of the reach of criticism, even if they might hurt the sentiments of a select few. Both Zaheer and Ali’s understanding of the role of literature falls in line with the aesthetic regime of Ranciere by allowing the visibilization of a discourse around God that was prohibited by the rules of the representative regime and the requirements to speak of issues of importance in their proper ways. The earlier-discussed principles of the representative regime are negated in the authors’ attempts to speak of God irreverently and open up avenues of literature to discuss issues that could be of extreme socio-political importance as literature should do. It is this ability to bring down God from his high pedestal and altar of devotion to be an object of criticism that makes these stories an example of the earliest attempts to inaugurate the aesthetic regime of the arts. Both Zaheer and Ali’s works force a suturing of two completely separate realms, the real and the sacred, and also by making the sacred the object of criticism is the example of *Angaaray*’s dissensuality—its ability to profanate the sacred and the holy.

The only woman writer of the *Angaaray* quartet, Rashid Jahan’s play “In the Women Quarters” attempts to perform the Rancierian task of politics by exposing the inequalities that exist behind the veil, so to speak, where the issues and problems of women are invisibilized and kept away from public gaze or knowledge. One of the fundamental tasks of Rancierian politics is the exposure of the world within the already-existing world, which is hidden and not allowed to be seen. Jahan’s play tries to expose the worlding of these separate worlds and how one is kept out of the public gaze so as to not cause social problems in the neat and compartmentalized world order. “In the Women’s Quarter” is in the form of a discussion between two women, Mahmudi Begum and her friend Aftab Begum, taking place in the house of Mahmudi. Mahmudi tells Aftab that she wants to kill herself because she is troubled by her life and goes on to elucidate her troubles by saying that she is pregnant every year without respite, her husband only thinks of her as a body to have sexual intercourse with and does not even allow her to breastfeed her children since he wants her body all to himself, which results in their children being malnourished. He also cheats on her and continuously threatens to divorce her; this gives her immense anxiety and she suggests that she has lost her youth and looks older than she is.

The original title of the play, “Parde ke Peeche”, literally translated as behind the veil, brings to the fore Jahan’s desire to highlight the problems of the private sphere. The separation of the private and public spheres, which Ranciere believes is what the oligarchic social order tries to maintain, is laid bare here, and Jahan tries to conflate the

public and the private world to show that the problems of the private sphere are also issues that need discussion in the public realm.

The play exposes the exploitation of the female body and the sexual abuse of Mahmudi by her husband, and she sheds light on the issues of reproduction, contraception, breastfeeding, and so forth, which for long have been relegated to the private sphere and not worthy of discussion in the public sphere. Jahan's play unveils the "discursive and material barriers that attempt to demarcate the private and the public" (Gopal 40), and she suggests that these issues have been relegated to the world "behind the veil" so that the status quo is maintained and trouble is not caused for the oligarchic social order. She questions the need for these boundaries and separations between the public and the private spheres, and her exposition of the publicness of the private is, in a sense, one of the dissensual characteristics of *Angaaray*. An interesting encounter in the play is when Mahmudi recounts to Aftab when a lady doctor had come to check on her fever and was surprised to find out that she was pregnant. On asking Mahmudi's age, to which she replies that she is thirty-two, the doctor does not believe her at first, to which Mahmudi explains that due to her perpetual bad health, her teeth have fallen due to pyorrhoea. While the doctor is shocked that Mahmudi is two months pregnant even though she has had a perpetual fever for months, Mahmudi mocks the doctor's naivete and says:

Hey now, Miss. You are well-to-do, earn your own money, are well fed and sleep well at night. These men don't care whether they go to heaven or hell after they die. It doesn't matter whether a wife is awful or good, or even whether she is dying. Men only have one thing on their minds (Jahan 120).

This simple encounter between the doctor and Mahmudi is necessary for Jahan wants to show the need to publicize the domestic sphere. Jahan's dissensuality comes from her attempt to highlight a world that is hidden from the real world so that one can witness the realities of this occluded world. The gaze that she allows is not the promiscuous one of Mahmudi's husband but rather one that forces the reader to acknowledge the problems of the real world that are hidden behind the veil. Jahan is concerned with manifesting this unmanifested world and thrusting the deep rot that women of this world have to face onto the realm of public life, and hence providing a glimpse of the squalor of disease that the future independent India must face if it is to be a successful democracy that is faithful to every part of the population, hidden or unhidden. Her play puts focus on the need to reconfigure spaces and allow the disenfranchised a way to participate in the democracy-to-come. It is also the visibilization of the political quality of Mahmudi's grievance as a problem that should not be in the margins but rather in the public realm as it is a problem not of the private sphere but an issue of the nation as a whole—issues of women's health, sexual abuse, and suffering. Through the character of Mahmudi, Jahan attempts to politicize the speech of Mahmudi, imbuing it with a political quality that ruptures the logic of segregation of the problems of Muslim women.

This discussion of three stories from the collection *Angaaray* attempted to highlight the issues that these writers thought to be of public relevance in a world of Urdu letters that could not rid itself of age-old adherence to codes and ways of writing and romanticization of worlds that do not exist anymore. *Angaaray*, as we have seen, tried to bring the Urdu short story into the aesthetic regime of Ranciere by writing about objects, people, and things in ways that Urdu literature had not seen or heard of before. Theirs was a vision for independent India, which was that one must be able to address the socio-

political problems of Indian society too, along with the political independence that Indians sought from the British. For India to be a true democracy, the *Angaaray* quartet believed that they must be allowed to speak of any issue in any way they thought relevant, and the right to speak of it should be one of the fundamental rights in a free and progressive country. This paper has attempted to argue, therefore, that to better understand the task that these writers undertook, it is necessary to step away from the simple definition of their writing as “Progressive” and rather think of it as “dissensual”, which will make their works more relevant to the modern age.

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