

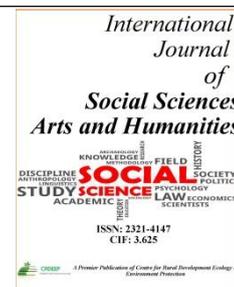
Vol. 7. No. 4. 2020.

©Copyright by CRDEEP Journals. All Rights Reserved.

Contents available at:

[www.crdeepjournal.org](http://www.crdeepjournal.org)

International Journal of Social Sciences Arts &amp; Humanities (ISSN: 2321-4147)(CIF: 3.625)



## Review

# Representation of Body and Sexuality in Rasheed Jahan`s Writings

Nazish Khan<sup>1\*</sup> and Nilofar Akhtar<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>-Associate Professor, Department of English, SSMMUSSS Government PG College, Dwarahat (Almora), Uttarakhand, India.<sup>2</sup>-Associate Professor, Department of English, MB Government PG College, Haldwani-Nainital, Uttarakhand, India.

### ARTICLE INFORMATION

#### Corresponding Author:

Dr Nazish Khan

#### Article history:

Received: 30-04-2020

Revised: 15-05-2020

Accepted: 21-05-2020

Published: 26-06-2020

#### Key words:

Radicalism, patriarchy, oppression, women`s bodies, zenana

### ABSTRACT

The publication of *Angarey*, a short story collection by a group of modern, liberated group of young men and a woman and their subsequent founding of Progressive Writer's Movement in the Indian subcontinent marks the rise of radicalism in the Urdu literary scene. The stories were pieces of realistic writing and provided a scathing critique of conservative Indian society and social ills such as poverty and misogyny, as well as conservative religiosity that restricted critical and freethinking. The anthology was considered to be obscene, vulgar, and offensive to peoples' religious sensibilities. Rasheed Jahan, the only woman contributor in this book was singled out for abuse as she raised her voice against the exploitation of women at the hands of men. The present paper will try to analyse how Rasheed Jahan addressed the notion of body and sexuality of women in her works to raise awareness about the pitiable condition of women.

Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) was a Urdu feminist writer in pre- and post-Independence India who influenced acclaimed women writers such as Ismat Chughtai. She was a doctor, a dedicated member of the Communist Party of India and one of the founding members of a progressive writers' movement. A life-long campaigner for women's rights, Rashid wrote freely in her works about such touchy issues faced by women in the zenana or women's quarters as the toll of early marriage, sexually transmitted diseases and the importance of birth control. Her short stories were first published in "*Angarey*" (1932), an anthology of Urdu fiction by four writers. She was the only woman writer in the quartet. But her stories courted controversy and were consequently banned for their "immorality"

The publication of *Angarey* in 1932, sent ripples through the Urdu literary scene as well as the Indian society as large. *Angarey* was a collection of nine short stories and one play by a group of young writers which consisted of Ahmad Ali, Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduz Zafar and Rasheed Jahan. The book was shocking as the stories presented a critique of conservative Indian society and its rampant social ills like poverty, bourgeois hypocrisy, misogyny, patriarchy, conservative and rigid religious outlook which had its unflinching grip on the minds and attitudes of the society. Even those who received western education did not leave their adherence to these outdated values. Modern outlook and critical and logical thinking and reasoning were out of question.

When the writers of *Angarey* addressed these issues, it created a furore in the complacent Indian society. There were widespread protests against the anthology which was considered obscene, vulgar and offensive to religious sensibilities. The book was consequently banned three months after its publication by the British Government. Amidst the widespread outcry against their book, the group of writers formally established the Progressive Writers' Association. The PWA drew in its circle various writers and artists and soon became an organization for Marxist writers and intellectuals and provided a medium for the articulation of ideas pertaining to Marxist ideology, equality, secularism, progress and egalitarianism. PWA was influenced by the modernist movement in Europe and it, in turn, influenced Urdu literature not only in terms of themes but also technique. The writings of these writers were a break from the highly stylized and romanticized works that had till now dominated the corpus of Urdu literature. Urdu literature had until that time focussed either on the exploration of fantasy and mystical or on the exaggerated didactic and moralistic themes. The *Angarey* anthology focussed on introspection and social realism to make a critique of the socio-political situation in India. They also dealt for the first time with the women's issues and exposed the oppressive condition of Muslim women who were enslaved to their husbands' demands and had to live enclosed within

the boundaries set up by religious and social principles. They presented a critique of bourgeois, elite Muslim culture and its conservatism and hypocrisy and the idea of respectability. These writers broke the taboo by dealing explicitly with sex, prostitution and women's health in their works. The elite Muslim gentry were shocked by the attack on religion, the blatant exploration of sexuality and their work was at once labeled blasphemous, immoral and indecent.

Rasheed Jahan, the only woman writer in this group was singled out for the harshest criticism. Being a doctor by profession, her work allowed her to become intimately familiar with the pitiable conditions suffered in all stratum of society. Women writers before Rasheed Jahan, conformed with the acceptable norms of society, never daring to attack the norms of respectability. But Rasheed Jahan directly and vehemently attacked these social and cultural norms of the respectable Muslim society to bring forth the plight of women in zenana. She spoke to lift the taboos from the issues that were hitherto unspoken of; like women's health and sexuality, sexual harassment in marital life pregnancy, birth control and abortion.

In *Behind the Veil*, she highlights the issues faced by women in abusive and oppressive marriage. Two women from well to do and respectable family talk about the woes of marriage. In the frank conversation that Mohammadi Begum has with her sister in law, they openly talk about their bodies, deplorable health condition brought on by repeated childbirth, sexual plight. These topics were beyond the periphery of the public forum and were considered taboo. Mohammadi Begum at the age of 32, looks haggard and old and even has lost her teeth. Her deplorable condition is brought on by her husband who is only concerned with gratifying his lust. After coming back from England, he complained that her mouth smelled and had her teeth removed, the hint is that he may not have lived a righteous life there. The situation gets worse when he gets interested in his wife's teenage cousin. The play exposes the terrible exploitation of women who face health issues due to frequent child bearing and also have to face unfaithfulness of their husbands and are even threatened by polygamy. The play boldly advocates birth control, an option which was not approved by the conventional Muslim society.

The play *Aurat Aur Mard (Man and Woman)*, is a dialogue between a couple not given names. The man proposes to marry the woman provided that she gives up her job. The woman asks her prospective husband questions pertaining to her freedom and identity. The issue raised here is about the misconception regarding empowered women who are not often thought as a good home maker and since this problem does not singularly belong to a particular community, it is a problem that women face in all the sections and all the communities of the society, hence the writer has not given names to the characters to avoid making it a religion or community specific. Here Rasheed Jahan's questions were addressed to a society which was deep rooted in orthodoxy and tradition and whose literature only a couple of decades ago was directing and instructing women on how to become good obedient wives and mothers. Most of the other literature written in the early 20th century was about raising women, providing them with role models to become good wives. But Rasheed Jahan established a tradition of protest by speaking about the identity and empowerment of women.

The short story *Who (She)* explores the relation of Safiya, an upper class woman and Woh, a prostitute disfigured by venereal disease. It discusses the attitude of the educated, liberated, upper class respectable woman towards another woman who is looked down upon as she is believed to be a prostitute. She is marginalized even by women in order to maintain their respectability and cut off from the mainstream of society. Her attempts at amalgamation and making friends with the society are met with disgust, insult and humiliation and the spaces for her are marked and excluded from the rest. Towards the end when she is humiliated publicly and kicked out from the school premises, Safiya remains a passive onlooker without showing any solidarity with her. Social morality and class disparity are strong notions that thwart any attempt of reconciliation between the socially privileged and the downtrodden.

*The ostler's mother* presents shifting power dynamics amongst women of a family the exploitation and harassment is meted out to another woman at the behest of the mother in the house, I is only after the latest daughter-in-law decides to stand up to the older woman that her position in the family is secured. *A trip to Delhi* recounts the harrowing experience of a woman in purdah. The narrator relates her experience of a trip to Delhi, which generated interest because the destination was Delhi and the journey was by train. But the journey ends abruptly in anticlimax when the husband leaves the wife on the platform with the luggage and disappears for hours. Covered in Burqa, in the heat and amidst bustling crowd, the woman has to bear the lewd remarks of the onlookers. She is exposed to a world to which she does not belong and suffers humiliation and insult which her husband fails to understand and empathize with. The boundaries of the house are the circumscribed spaces for a woman, when she leaves the space of the zenana and enters public space she is left at the mercy of the outside world which baffles her and threatens her sense of security which is provided by her household. The play brings out the importance of veil in the subjugation of women.

*The Reticent Maiden (Bezuban)*, raises questions about the idea of respectability and family honour and the orthodoxy, inflexibility and rigidity that surrounds it. Ahmadi Begum breaks off her son's engagement with her niece because she had received western education. She has not provided education to her daughter who is of marriageable age. The new trend was that the prospective grooms wanted to get a glimpse of the girl, which was considered highly objectionable by Ahmadi and hence all proposals fall through. The daughter bears the brunt of her parents' rigidity and suffers silently. Rasheed Jahan's experiences as a doctor provided the subject matter for her stories. *Asif Jehan's Daughter-in-law (Asif Jehan ki bahu)*, presents the complications of a child delivery at home. Asif's sister-in-law has been in labour for three days and after a lot of serious complications gives birth to a daughter, Asif Jehan had decided that she would bring Kubra's daughter as her daughter-in-law. So the family is jubilant and amidst the celebrations, the mother, who had been in a critical childbirth is immediately forgotten. People start congratulating Asif Jehan instead of the real mother. She is treated as a mere agent for bringing someone's daughter-in-law in this world. Rasheed Jahan not only drew sketches of women and their predicament but also gave them agency. The play *Woman (Aurat)* holds an important place in Rasheed Jahan's oeuvre because it not only talks about a woman's pitiable condition but it

goes a step further and shows her taking a stand which was quite unusual for the times. Fatima's husband, Maulvi Atiqullah distributes amulets, talismans and has a huge following of devotees, but he himself is childless. Fatima has given birth to several children but none of them could survive. Fatima's cousin brings a doctor who takes her blood sample and she is diagnosed with gonorrhoea which obviously she has contracted from her husband. This is the reason that her children could never survive. Meanwhile, Atiqullah uses the pretext to get married again and on her wife's objection slaps her. When Fatima finds out about the illness, she confronts her husband and rises from the position of a submissive wife and is ready to drag him to court even at the risk of getting a divorce. Her confidence stems from the fact that she is the owner of her house which was willed to her by her father which empowers her to take a firm stand against oppression.

Rasheed Jahan's writings called for a complete restructuring of Indian society free from chauvinistic male-dominance. For instance, while highlighting women's issues in the domestic sphere, Jahan depicted her female characters as independently engaging with the outside world. Ultimately, while the progressive movement at large dealt with women's issues and the abuse, struggles, and oppressions that they faced, it was Jahan's works that truly pushed the bounds of traditional conservative society. Through her vociferous attacks on socio-economic elitism, misogyny, and regressive traditional beliefs, Jahan challenged societal norms like no other member of the infamous and influential Angarey group Jahan's works truly went to the core of women's issues and showed women present and engaged in all spheres of society. Using her education and medical training, Jahan shed light not only the socio-religious restrictions on women, but also the way that these cultural modes were interconnected with issues such as women's health and sexualities. Her writings explored the intersection of class, sexuality, and religion, and presented a nuanced view of how these issues not only affected Muslims and women, but Indian society as a whole.

### Works Cited

1. Abid Attia Trans. *Dr. Rasheed Jahan: Selected Short Stories and Plays*, Yash Publications, New Delhi, 2010.
2. Ahmed Talat, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism: The Progressive Episode in South Asia, 1932-56*, Routledge, 2009.
3. Ali, Mehr, "*The Women of the PWA: The Politics and Writings of Rashid Jahan and Qurratulain Hyder*" (2018). Undergraduate Honors Theses. Paper 1234. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1234>
4. Chauhan Vibha and Alvi Khalid Trans. *Angarey*, Rupa, New Delhi, 2014.
5. Bano Shadab, *Rashid Jahan's Writings: Resistance and Challenging Boundaries*, Angaare and Onward; *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, New Delhi, Vol 19, No. 1, 2012.
6. Gopal Priyamvada, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender Nation and the Transition to Independence*, Routledge, 2005
7. Jalil Rakhshanda, *A Rebel and her Cause: The Life of Rashid Jahan*, Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2014.