

Women and the Domestic Space in Rashid Jahan's *Parde ke Peechey*

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Abstract:

Rashid Jahan is remembered today for her radical writings on women's issues and as an early champion of women's rights. Her consciousness, as a writer and as a social reformer, is shaped by her life-long commitment towards her profession as a women's health practitioner, and her association with the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and various other communist movements which always strived to bring social change, empowerment and awareness. With recent debates in legal and socio-political domains on the rights of Muslim women which are closely associated with the institution of marriage, her writings become an important sight to understand the condition and position of women in Muslim households' domestic spaces. Jahan's works gave voice to issues which articulate the concerns of Muslim women that were traditionally kept hidden under the guise of domesticity. She raised issues related to female agency and consent in matters of sexuality, female body, women's health and the unequal gender power relations which proved to be oppressive and exploitative towards women. Such a thought has been reflected and communicated through her plays in a creative, expressive and dramatic manner. The present paper attempts to trace the voice of protest against rigid and oppressive social structures through the English translation of Jahan's one-act play, Parde ke Peechey. It further aims to analyse Jahan's thoughts on the root cause behind oppression of women that takes place in the institution of marriage.

Keywords: *Marriage, Women's Rights, One-act plays, Protest, Social Reform*

All India Progressive Writers Movement along with diverse social reform and nationalist movements, created an atmosphere of argumentation and debate in the public sphere on the issues related to women's agency, upliftment and emancipation. The reformist zeal in the Muslim community began in the decades when Jahan was too young. On the one hand, she inherited the legacy of social reform from within her family. Her parents, Sheikh Abdullah and Wajid Jahan, were the early Muslim advocates to raise concern for education of Muslim women. Madhulika Singh rightly points out their literary contribution for the cause of women. She writes that Jahan's father "founded the widely circulated Urdu journal for women," named Khatun in 1914 and her mother contributed to it frequently (1). While on the other hand, Muslim women had begun to negate the idea of a secluded protest against gender inequality and injustice against women. Many of them participated in various pan India women's associations such as Women's Indian Organization which was formed in 1917 and All India Women's Conference which was formed by the Indian National Congress in 1927. Their aim was to focus on "the issues specific to women and their social and legal disabilities" (Hussain 1).

They made a remarkable presence and primarily struggled for legal rights of women in matters of education, property inheritance, marriage and divorce during the 1920s and 30s.

Literature of this period deeply reflects, interrogates and suggests remedies to the social complexities which had arisen due to the heated debates between the two oppositional forces to which the Muslim Personal Law was subjected. The oppositions were between the traditional, conservative and orthodox forces and the liberal, more secular and modernist forces. In the field of drama, Nandi Bhatia investigates that there were playwrights who “dealt with the politics of domesticity through subjects pertaining to marital discord, education, social reform, extra-marital affairs, the problem of dowry, and so forth” (34). She further observes that depiction and examination of the “position of women with regard to family and marriage” (35) was central to pre-independent India’s dramatic tradition. Representation of the lives and experiences of Muslim women in conjugal relationships was the trend followed by the genre of drama, especially Urdu drama, during the times when Jahan was actively writing. The present paper attempts to study the figure and condition of a woman within the institution of marriage in Jahan’s one-act play, *Parde ke Peechey*, which was a product of the times which favoured change. It also attempts to seek the root cause of women’s oppression in the institution of marriage. Some of the questions which the paper attempts to investigate are, whether the traditional Islamic culture was oppressive towards women or did men start to appropriate and misinterpret the religious authorities to their benefit, and how is social upliftment as well as emancipation of women possible?

Her play, titled *Parde ke Peechey* (translated as Behind the Veil), is a part of the highly controversial anthology *Angare* which was published in 1932. The anthology has been seen as a marker of radical literary trend in Urdu literature. The play is formulated in the form of a dialogic narrative that takes place between Muhammadi Begum, a muslim woman from a well known family, and Aftab Begum, her guest. It explores the secluded life of muslim women belonging to ashraf families. As the title suggests, it brings to focus the deplorable condition of Muslim women when a closer look ‘behind the veil,’ which is representative of retrogressive values functioning in Muslim society, is made. It is an account of what Madhulika Singh calls as “oppressive domesticity.” In the process of unveiling the complains of Muhammadi Begum, Jahan begins to imagine a speaking subject. Here, the dramatic act provides an alternate and subversive space where the culturally and socially silenced voice of the victimised women is presented without any interruption.

Jahan critiques the stereotypical notion that a woman’s existence is limited to the domestic sphere and her roles as a wife and mother, thereof. In *Parde Ke Peechey*, Jahan experiments with the conversational style of narration whereby women overtly question their role in family and community. The two women begin to critically explore the notion whether marriage and conjugal relations are the most important part of a woman’s life. The traditional approach towards the position of women in the institution of marriage is highlighted by Aftab Begum, who says to Muhammadi Begum, “Who can be as fortunate as you?... you have a home, a husband, children, everything” (200). Ironically, from here on, the two women begin to unveil the reality which comprises of issues related to women—their agency and rights in private spaces.

Discussion of issues related to women’s body at public forums in those times was an uncommon practice. But with the development of women’s movement and the secular discourse of nationalism, the personal and individual issues related to women were on a rise among social activists and

reformists. When the play begins, Muhammadi Begum is introduced as a woman of thirty-two, who was married at the age of seventeen. Due to ill health, multiple pregnancies and unsympathetic attitude of her husband, her looks have withered. Furthermore, there are a number of issues related to women's body and health which Jahan attempts to communicate with the help of this play. One of the major ones is related to motherhood since it is mentioned that Muhammadi Begum is unable to nurture her children well. They look "pale and sickly, as though they are victims of starvation" (202), points out Aftab Begum. Hereafter, the wife points out that it is her husband's 'command' that she must acknowledge and satisfy his sexual needs, rather than fulfil her duty as a mother and feed the babies. Even though her bodily health is deteriorating, yet she has to neglect her personal ills to perform her role as a wife. Her husband controls and exploits her body to an extent that she is forced to undergo multiple surgeries of her private parts so that her husband "would get the same pleasure he might from a new wife" (211). These references explain that the wife is not given agency to control her own body and its functions. She readily accepts her husband's animalistic command in the form of multiple pregnancies and unreasonable sexual demands because he threatens her that "he will marry another woman and bring her home" (202), if she neglects his advances. She is aware that even after fulfilling his needs, he has sexual liaisons outside the conjugal union as well. In terms of explaining the critical functioning of a woman's body in gender power relations, Nishat Haider is of the view that, "Muhammadi Begum undergoes what Kartak terms as "internalised exile"(2) where the body feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency" (209). By becoming a part of the institutional structure of marriage, the woman is distanced from her own personal needs and loses agency over her own body.

During their conversation they discuss the plight of other women as well. They move from discussing the "fortunate position" of women in households to discussing the diverse ways in which the institution is unjust, exploitative and oppressive towards women, in addition to the hypocrite nature of men. They come to a point where they mutually agree that "everyone has their own troubles" (204). The reference is of every married woman or girl of a marriageable age. They further highlight the condition of women in polygamous unions. The two gossip about an old man, known to them, who has married a third time to a young and beautiful girl. The practice of polygamous unions was widely prevalent and accepted in Islamic cultures. This practice gives men the freedom to choose multiple wives. It also propagates unequal gender relations.

Jahan, attempts to expose how men use the polygamous structures to their undue advantage by bringing up the case of Razia, Muhammadi Begum's cousin sister. With Razia, Jahan elaborates upon the desire of an old man to marry a girl of tender age for sexual fulfilment. There is not shown any amount of jealousy amongst the two sisters, rather Razia is scared and Muhammadi Begum is outraged. At this moment, Jahan presents the wife as confronting her husband for his daring act of writing love letters to her cousin. But she says, "he stared straight into my eyes and asked me what was wrong in it. He said he wanted to marry Razia, even if it meant divorcing me" (208). He defends his actions and desires by citing the verses from Quran, the *Sharia* Board's legal acceptance of Muslim men marrying upto four times and the wife's ill health. He further wishes to gain the consent of his wife to re-marry her sister by emphasising that it is the duty of a wife to obey her husband. In a number of ways, therefore, the play "offers a variety of demystifications of traditional expected female roles, for instance, wifhood, not as it is traditionally expected to be fulfilling and nurturing but as enslaving" (Haider 204).

Jahan is known for not only raising the plight of women in domestic spaces but also attempting to provide certain solutions. Hamidi Saiduzzafar comments that, “she was quite aware 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” (162). This sums up Jahan’s socio-feminist approach in life. As a social reformer, she does intend to bring about changes in the Muslim Personal Law with regard to women’s agency, freedom to choose a partner, a liberal approach towards marriage, women’s education and age gaps in conjugal relations, especially in polygamous unions. But there are certain subtle solutions which she wishes to communicate to her reader/ audience as a writer. Through this play, particularly, she highlights that it is only when women will seek roles outside the domestic space and pursue a professional career, would they be able to gain agency over their body and actions. Further, by bringing up the case of Razia, she intends to highlight that society at large can also play a major role in bringing about a change and securing the lives of women. She propagates that on the one hand, the wife needs to confront the husband’s deeds and on the other, the targeted second victim’s family must choose and decide their daughter’s future wisely.

But at last, Muhammadi Begum’s confrontation does not prove to be strong. She only tries to make her husband understand the negative consequences of marrying a young girl, again. She is not provocative in her defence and gradually submits. This appears to be Jahan’s strategy to point out and communicate that a woman should not be secluded from matters of social reform and society must support such women in raising their voice against the unjust practices. She knows and accepts the fact that he will marry a second time. The stage direction towards the end reads, “the sound of the Alan can be heard wafting in from the mosque” (211). Jahan might have used this as a means to highlight that since religion has helped to propagate such unjust and unequal gender relations, there is a need to modify and follow a liberal approach to certain values, rituals, practices and customs.

Every society in order to progress must re-evaluate its traditional values. Through this play, Jahan conveys that cultural modes of radical writing help to achieve change and social transformation. She brings to light that financial independence is a means to achieve women empowerment and confront patriarchal ideology. Jahan’s writings poignantly point out that social reform is important because conservative values which are held sacred by religious authorities are falsely appropriated by men in society. The relevance of her limited literary output is that it raised a radical voice which is well informed by a feminist consciousness, to address the issues and experiences of women in domestic spaces such as marital structures, observance of purdah, women’s health and the mandate of triple talaq. The embers of the issues raised by her are still burning, since women who are followers of Islam are still spearheading nation-wide campaigns to outlaw *triple talaq*.

The genre of one act plays, for Jahan, opened up a space to argue, debate and discuss about subjects relating to women that were considered social taboos. Even though, most of the issues addressed in the play are left unresolved, they highlight women’s tendency to resist, counter and subvert oppressive social and cultural codes. In her works the possibility of self-empowerment through acquisition of voice and agency can be witnessed. The continuation of her legacy can be observed in more participation of women in activities of IPTA, the women’s liberation movement and the women’s theatre movement which gained momentum in 1970s.

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