



# Material Feminism: Reading Rashid Jahan's Angarey And Other Short Stories

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## Abstract:-

Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) a medical officer by profession and a communist by ideology broke every rule by which a Muslim woman from 'shareef gharana' was expected to live in pre-independent India of 1920s and 30s. She vociferously opposed societal norms that oppressed women through her works. She is one of the earliest women writers who is known for inaugurating a new era of Urdu literature written by women. The publication of Rashid Jahan's Angarey (1931), a collection of short stories and plays, co-authored with three male friends including her husband, created a stir among Muslim genteel for being too radical. She faced severe criticism from Muslim clerics on account of her portrayal of the plight of women and particularly Muslim women behind the 'veil' in the most realistic manner. Issues like women education and literacy, safe motherhood, safe contraception, sexual practices, sexual abuse etc. among Muslim women were raised for the first time in India. As a result Angarey was banned on charges of being 'immoral.' Material feminism is a theoretical framework that looks at global oppression of women, people of colour and minorities in terms of their concrete economic and social conditions. The practitioners of this theory view gender as social construct. They are of the opinion that women are historically viewed as mere objects for reproduction and their gender role in society has more or less confirmed that. There are many social and economic conditions that have resulted in marginalization of women. This paper aims at reading Rashid Jahan's Angarey in terms of social relations and analytics grounded in the material conditions of Muslim society in pre-independent India. I shall be focusing on analyzing social arrangements-most notably the family, domesticity, and motherhood- that have promoted women's marginalization. In other words, I shall be investigating what social and economic constraints prevented women from things like pursuing a career, access to education, opportunity to be self dependent economically etc.

**Keywords:** material feminism, women, social, economic, minority.

**DOI Number:** 10.48047/NQ.2022.20.17.NQ880134

**Neuroquantology 2022; 20(17):1046-1051**

Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) a medical officer by profession and a communist by ideology, broke every rule by which a Muslim woman from 'shareef gharana' was expected to live in pre-independent India of 1920s and 30s. She is often declared as a rebel with a cause. In fact, Rakshanda Jalil in *A Rebel and her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan* (2014) praises her for openness and frankness in speaking about religion and women.

Rashid Jahan was the eldest daughter of Sheikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan Begum. Both of them worked actively in education of Muslim girls. Despite of all the oppositions they were successful in establishing school for girls which

family where women were allowed to pursue education and career of their choice. Her mother and aunt taught at the Aligarh Girls' School and wrote for Urdu magazines including their own entitled '*Khatun.*' The house was always open for intellectuals and new ideas.

Rashid Jahan was a rebel in truest sense, she broke all the stereotypes on her way to becoming a doctor and a path breaking writer. She wrote some 25-30 short stories and 15-20 plays basically about women and on women. Unfortunately much of it is lost. Her extremely frank and sometimes angry stories about the

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**Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



Movement initiated.”<sup>1</sup> She has contributed in inspiring many feminist writers later on, for instance IsmatChughtai, who was her junior at the Aligarh school, confesses in her autobiography that Rashid Jahan was a freethinker and rebel. “She spoiled me because she was very bold and would speak all sort of things openly and loudly, and I just wanted to copy her... the handsome heroes and pretty heroines of my stories, the candle-like fingers, the lime blossoms and crimson blossoms all vanished... the earthy Rashid Jahan shattered all my ivory idols to pieces...Life, stark and naked, stood before me.”<sup>2</sup>

It was the publication of Rashid Jahan's *Angarey* (1931), a collection of short stories and plays, co-authored with three male friends Zahir Ahmed, Sajjad Zahir and her husband Mahmud-zzafar, that created a stir among Muslim genteel for being too radical. It was during her stay in Lucknow, she came in contact with these politically conscious young writers all of whom believed in the power of the written words to change the world. They are also given the credit of introducing new narrative techniques and initiating the Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu Literature, “These young writers not only challenged the social orthodoxy but also traditional literary narratives and techniques. In an attempt to represent the individual mind and its struggle, they ushered in the narrative technique known as stream of consciousness” (Babbar, 8).

This young group of writers challenged the orthodoxy and hypocrisy of Muslim society. Rashid Jahan faced severe criticism from Muslim clerics on account of her portrayal of the plight of women and particularly Muslim women behind the 'veil' in the most realistic manner. Issues like women education and literacy, safe motherhood, safe contraception, sexual practices, sexual abuse etc. among Muslim women were raised for the first time in India. As a result *Angarey* was banned on charges of being 'immoral.' Three months after

its publication, due to severe criticism and public outrage, the British government was forced to impose ban and circulation its publication in 1933. The Muslim clerics issued *fatwas* against the four authors, and being the only female writer in the group Rashid Jahan suffered all the more for transgressing the boundaries of behavior that is expected from a young educated Muslim woman in pre independent India. Threatened of an acid attack, Rashid Jahan continued to speak her mind. She had become the notorious 'Angareywali' in public. The irony of the whole situation was that people condemned her openly yet enjoyed reading *Angarey* in private spaces. Ahmed Ali wrote:

We knew the book would create a stir, but never dreamt it would bring the house down. We were condemned at public meetings and private; bourgeois families hurried to dissociate themselves from us and denied acquaintance with us, especially with Rashid Jahan and myself...people read the book behind closed doors and in bathrooms with relish but denounced us in the open. We were lampooned and satirized, condemned editorially and pamphlets... our lives were threatened.<sup>3</sup>

Newspapers and journals published angry editorials and articles denouncing the book, calling it a “filthy pamphlet...which has wounded the feelings of the entire Muslim community...and which is extremely objectionable from the point of view of both religion and morality.”<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims at reading Rashid Jahan's *Angarey* in terms of social relations and analytics grounded in the material conditions of Muslim society in pre-independent India. I shall be focusing on analyzing social arrangements-- most notably the family, domesticity, and motherhood-- that have promoted women's marginalization. In other words, I shall be investigating what social and economic constraints prevented women from

<sup>1</sup> Amrita Dutta, “Rashid Jahan: A Spark that Lit Fire.” *Indian Express*. 23 May 2014.  
<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/a-spark-that-lit-the-fire/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Rashid Jahan: The Bad Girl of Urdu Literature.” *Sangat Review*. <http://www.sangatreview.org/rashid-jahan/>

<sup>4</sup> Rakshanda Jalil. “The Bad Girl of Urdu Literature.” 4 January 2012.

<http://www.thefridaytimes.com/beta3/tft/article.php?issue=20130104&page=16>



things like pursuing a career, access to education, opportunity to be self-dependent economically etc. and specifically Muslim women.

**II** Material feminism is a theoretical framework that looks at global oppression of women, people of colour and minorities in terms of their concrete economic and social conditions. The practitioners of this theory view gender as social construct. They are of the opinion that women are historically viewed as mere objects for reproduction and their gender role in society has more or less confirmed that. The situation is all the more difficult and typical in case of Muslim women. There are different causes of Muslim women's disempowerment and oppression. Firstly, Muslim women are dependent on different interpretation of *Sharia* laws. Within legal framework polygamy and divorce is permissible and easy for men. This in effect has deteriorated the condition of women and has generated feeling of insecurity and fear among women. Rashid Jahan has very frankly discussed the plight, fear and anxieties of a Muslim woman by plays like *Aurat* (1941) and *PardekePeeche* (Behind the Veil) (1942).

*Aurat* leaves us with a hope of change and progress. Fatima, a childless woman, is married to Atiq, a maulvi who is insistent on remarrying in order to produce an heir. He tries to convince Fatima on the grounds that *Sharia* laws permit remarriage "if a woman is barren or her babies do not live" (214). Fatima vociferously attacks him by saying, "This is the first time I have heard about the Shariat saying anything about children who don't live! You can produce any Shariat you like." (214) Rashid Jahan has time and again raised issues related to religious laws and their contribution in enslavement of wo-men. Atiq is a corrupt Maulvi who treats people of their sickness by giving them amulets and potions. When Fatima exposes his hypocrisy she is beaten and insulted by Atiq. Atiq is representation of any so called 'shareef' man who wants his wife willingly allow second marriage. He promises to be just while dealing with both the wives. Rashida ridicules justification given by men for remarriage:

Exactly! What would he know? A man thinks as

long as he has given a woman food and clothing, he has done enough. The more conscientious husband would think he is being fair if he spends one night with one wife and the other with the second. As though wives were mere toys for their husband, he can play with either one he fancies. And who is to blame? (230)

Fatima mocks at 'shareef' men and refutes to her aunt's argument that it is Allah who has given higher status to men in society:

Oh, come on! Men have written these books according to their own wishes. Those who create religions, write shariahs and laws-they are all men after all! They write everything to suit men; what would they know about a woman's heart? Had they been woman, they would have known. (231)

Atiq in actuality wants a younger wife, daughter of a devotee, who will be more docile and pliable. Silently many times Rashid Jahan encourages women solidarity, "What if the two women were to unite? What would the man do then? The man would leave both and marry a third! I just don't mean the two wives; I mean women generally." (231) The same idea of men often quoting or rather manipulating religious texts or *sharia* laws to prove their argument is seen in *Behind the Veil*. When Muhammadi Begum revolted against her husband's demand of getting married to her cousin Razia on the pretext of having fallen in love with her, he first tries to cajole her by saying, "Believe me, I am completely smitten with her. For God's sake, help me." (97) In order to pressurize her further he starts quoting verses from *Quran* in order to convince her for remarriage, "He used to sit with the *Quran Sharif* and read out *aayats* (verses) about the kind of hell I will face after death if I don't help my husband. Anyway, which fire could have burnt me more than the one I carried within me, the one which scorched me all the time? In short, the same story that he would go mad was repeated endlessly." (98) Both Fatima and Muhammadi are insecure about their future due to their husband's insistent demand of remarriage. Both religion and *sharia* laws have not been able to render them sense of justice or security.



Secondly, women as mere objects for reproduction and their gender role in society has been challenged more or less confirmed that. This is well expressed in works like *Behind the Veil*. It is a one act play, published in *Agarey* along with other short stories. It created serious furor among Muslim clergy and the elite class. Here she exposes the condition of women from 'shareef khandan.' The play is a conversation between two women. Aftab Begum who is about 40 years and the younger one who looks much older, tired and depressed Muhammadi Begum, "The lady doctor asked my age. 'thirty two years', I said. She smiled in a way that gave me an impression that she did not believe me." (85) Married at 17, Muhammadi Begum has borne children every year since; except twice when her husband was abroad and once when they had fought. The children are unhealthy and mal-nutritioned. They are pale, thin, quarrelsome, ill-kempt and rowdy. This is because she is not allowed to breast feed and nurse children because the husband has huge sexual appetite and not only his wife he goes around to other women too, prostitutes, "I am always terrorized by the threat, 'I will remarry if you breastfeed the children. I need a woman at all times. I don't have the patience to wait while you attend to the children.'" (89) There are several ayahs and maid kept for taking care of children yet they remain unmanageable:

How else be when they are deprived of their mother's milk? They bring home any kind of wet nurse they can find; the blind, the pock-marked, the fat, the thin. Whoever one stumbles upon is employed. My husband is the decision maker. He says I need not bother with all this when with God's grace, we have money. 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. (88)

Muhammadi Begum is also medically unhealthy. She suffers from pyorrhea and has had several teeth pulled out that too because the husband complained that her mouth stinks. As a lady doctor Rashid Jahan has used her real

life experiences in her works. The lady doctor who examines Muhammadi Begum is none other than the voice of Doctor Rashid Jahan herself. She becomes mouthpiece of Muhammadi Begum expressing how women suffered due to early marriage and frequent childbirth. Muhammadi Begum in spite of poor health is pregnant again and forced for sex in spite of suffering from fever and gynecological issues. This is not only case of Muhamaadi Begum, she gives reference of Mirza Maqbool Ali Shah who is old with granddaughters has married again. The new wife is not more than twenty years. She is forced into marriage as she has six unmarried sisters. Muhamadi Begum says, "And this latest wife of his is so young; with such an innocent face! She would be hardly twenty. The unlucky girl is doomed. She has six unmarried sisters." (91)

The issues of women health and neglect of safe contraception or delivery of child is often highlighted by Rashid Jahan. Not only by giving the example of Muhammadi Begum she portrays issues of female health but in many short stories she has focused on female health. In *A Daughter-in-law for Asif Jahan*, Rashid Jahan has been extremely open and frank about trauma a woman has to face while childbirth. Plus, unskilled and illiterate midwives make it all the more dangerous for the patient. The midwife uses of rusted knife to cut the umbilical of the newly born infant, then in spite of complications in the delivery, the females of the household prefer illiterate midwife over a skilled doctor.

Thirdly, when it comes to education mostly Muslim women are not allowed western education. In fact they are forced to take up religious education. And if some of them are educated they are ridiculed or taunted as 'Memsahib.' In this short story *Saas aur Bahu*, Rashid Jahan brings out the tussle between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, representation of orthodox and modern. The mother-in-law disapproves her daughter -in-law on account of her modern thinking and education and often used the word 'memsahib' in a derogatory manner.

Fourthly, imposition of purdah system, early marriage and polygamy has more or resulted



in disempowerment of women. In this short story 'Dilli ki Sair' Rashid Jahan has presented a simple incident though it leaves a deep impact. Malka Begum, a young housewife, is the first among her acquaintances to have taken a ride in train and gone to Delhi. She had already recounted the story thousand times, but there is always a ready audience to hear it again, probably because these women have never ever travelled to Delhi. This train ride has given Malka Begum a standing among other women. It does not matter the listeners whether the trip was memorable or not. It was just her journey by train that elevated her status. The situation is highly ironical because as soon as Malka Begum and her husband reached Delhi, at the railway station, Malka Begum's husband meets an acquaintance, some station master, and goes off on his own leaving her to guard the luggage. Cladded in a burqa, sitting atop her luggage, she waits on the platform for hours watching the people and action around. She had to tolerate stares and comments passed by rowdy men who are especially curious about women in burqa. Some cough deliberately and others pass lewd comments. One of them says, "Show us your face..." (121) Petrified she keeps sitting there guarding the luggage and also suffers pangs of hunger. Finally the husband returns after two hours, twirling his moustaches, not looking a bit repentant about abandoning her in an unknown place. Hungry and terrified by male gazes she had lost all the zeal for sightseeing. She just wants to return home. Carelessly the husband asks her, "I can get some *puris* if you are hungry? Will you eat? I have already eaten at the hotel." (123) It is just a two page story and it speaks volumes regarding callous attitude of husband and male privileges. It is a penetrating account of life behind veil or burqa and how men continue to enjoy without any regrets. Women tolerate their callousness by justifying it as, "Men are like that; women know it and can do nothing about it." (Jalil, 2014; 139)

There are many social and economic conditions that have resulted in marginalization of women. Rashid Jahan through her writing has vociferously opposed such societal norms responsible for women's dependence on man economically. In her short

story 'Mard aur Aurat' she deliberately does not assign any names to the characters. The story is in the form of a conversation taking place between a man and a woman. The man wants to marry this woman and tries to convince her that her job will in many ways act as an impediment in their 'happily married ever after.' She refuses to abandon the idea of quitting her job for the sake of matrimony. The man mocks at the woman urging her to quit her job by saying, "kaunsa ek hazarrupyakamayakarti ho. Sau rupya ...to tumaharitanhahai" (97) (you don't earn a thousand rupees or so; merely 100 rupees is your salary). The lady retorts "Kuchbhi ho, hai to yeh meri azadi ki kunji" (97) (whatever it is, it is key to my freedom). It is through this woman Rashid Jahan tries to emphasise on the need for women to be economically independent and not to forsake career in the name of matrimony. Her short stories deal with themes such as oppression, women health, gender discrimination, religion, marriage, relationship between man and woman etc. In a similar manner Rashid Jahan has focused on the need of economic independence of women in her play 'Behind the Veil.' Muhammadi finds her condition is bad because she is not financially independent. She has to suffer because she is not capable of taking care of her own needs unlike the lady doctor who seems to be an empowered lady, "Aye, Miss Sahib! You are fortunate. You earn money for yourself, and you spend it the way you wish too, and sleep in peace. As far as I am concerned, who cares if I go to hell or to heaven! All that they care about is their pleasure and enjoyment." (90).

III Rashid Jahan's works are pertinent because her works have successfully initiated emancipatory thinking at a point of time when women were not only put behind veils but also silenced. Through her writings she made them understand that for a woman economic independence is a way to dignified life. Stories and plays such *MardwaAurat (Man and Woman)*, *Dilli ki Sair (A Tour to Delhi)*, *PardekePeechey (Behind the Veil)*, *Woman(Aurat)*, *Sale*, and many others have highly realistically portrayed condition of Muslim woman of 'shareef khandan.'



In the present it becomes important to revisit the works of Rashid Jahan because they are outstanding in terms of issues they raised. Women who questioned societal norms and moral values were often scorned and hated. Rashid Jahan faced that defamation and ill treatment yet she did not give up. She continued to work both in theory and practice for women and their progress. Her works are significant because even after 80 years or so the issues raised by her remain unresolved. This is equally interesting to note that prior to French Feminists like Simone De Beauvoir who became role model for modern woman, rebellious and freethinking woman, Rashid Jahan had already established herself as one. To conclude with apt words of Dr. Hamida Saiduzzafar describes Rashid Jahan as:

Rashid Jahan was first woman in Urdu who addressed herself squarely, consistently and forcefully to the myriad of problems of the middle and lower-middle class woman in Indian society, she can rightly be called Urdu literature's first 'angry young woman.'<sup>5</sup>

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