# Shades of South Asian Women in Rasheed Jahan's Writings: Navigating Patriarchies, Spaces, Regime Control, and Colonialism

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**Abstract**

*Women in South Asia had a different colonial experience compared to that of men. Colonialism liberated indigenous women from traditionally restrictive practices, expanding their mobility opportunities. It also introduced indigenous women to newer forms of colonial patriarchy and sometimes resurrected older forms of masculine privilege. Women attempted to overcome obstacles to education and healthcare, forced marriages, and restrictions on their freedom of movement. A group of women actively participated in the nationalist movement and advocated for women's rights. Writing allowed colonised women in South Asia to convey their thoughts and experiences and to challenge the oppressive structures that confined them, ultimately leading to women's liberation. By drawing attention* to the *intersectionality of gender, religion, and culture, women writers in South Asia,* particularly the Islamic women writers have contributed significantly to the feminist movement. These writings have given Muslim women in the region a voice and have challenged patriarchal norms and stereotypes. The writings of Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, and Qurratulain Hyder continue to serve as a source of inspiration and motivation for future generations of women.

The present study delves into the literary works of Rasheed Jahan, with a focus on the portrayal of South Asian women and their experiences in overcoming various forms of patriarchal oppression, their navigation through regimes and their mechanisms of control, their struggle for establishment of identities in diverse social settings, resisting authoritarian regimes, and recovering from the aftermath of colonialism while carving out spaces for their survival.

**Keywords:** *Rasheed Jahan, South Asia, Women, Muslim, Spaces, Writing, Voice, Colonialism.*

I

## Shades of South Asian Women in Colonial Times

The experience of colonialism varied among women in South Asia. Initially, colonial interventions served to liberate women in South Asia from various types of subjugation and bias prevalent during the pre-colonial era. These included impediments to education and healthcare, coerced marriages, and limitations on their freedom of movement (Burton 2003; Hasan 2006). These were some of the methods by which women were subjected to oppression. Furthermore, colonial interventions facilitated noteworthy advancements towards gender parity in the area, as evidenced by a rise in female involvement in political spheres and heightened cognisance of their entitlements (Beck & Keddie (ed) 1978; Hasan & Menon (ed) 2004). Despite the gendered experience in the colonial encounter, a cohort of women actively participated in the nationalist movement and championed the cause of women's rights (Chakravarty 2008; Farooqi (ed) 2011). Writing provided the colonized women in South Asia a platform to express their thoughts and experiences and challenge the oppressive structures that confined them (Ali 2000; Anagol 2005). This ultimately resulted in women's emancipation. A compelling inquiry that has yet to be fully addressed pertains to the ways in which the practice of writing contributed to the liberation of women who had been previously subjugated in South Asia during the colonial period (Hardy 1972; Alavi & Siddiqui (ed) 2007; Ghosh (ed) 2007; Hurley 2007).

Writings in Urdu by women, particularly Islamic women writers, showcase the shades of South Asian women and the intersectionality of gender, religion, and culture. Women writers in South Asia who wrote in Urdu have brought this to light, which has been a significant contribution to the feminist movement in the global south (Lateef 1990; Khanam & amp; Samiuddin 2002). These writings have also assisted in eliminating generalisations and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Muslim women in the region.

Not only did these writings give voice to their struggles, but they also brought attention to the intersectionality of their identities, which included gender, religion, and culture (Husain 2006). These women, through the writing that they produced, paved the way for subsequent generations of women to continue the fight for their rights and equality. These writings were instrumental in challenging the patriarchal norms and stereotypes prevalent in society, and they paved the way for women's empowerment in South Asian countries like India

and Pakistan (Lateef 1990; Kumar 1994; Khanam & Samiuddin 2002; Khanna 2018, 2021).

Rasheed Jahan's, Ismat Chughtai's, and Qurratulain Hyder's writings, among others, continue to serve as a source of motivation and encouragement for countless future generations of women. This article examines how Rasheed Jahan's writings depict South Asian women and their struggles as they attempt to overcome patriarchal norms, establish their identities in different social contexts, fight back against authoritarian regimes, and recover from the legacy of colonialism.

## II

## Shades of the Doctor, Writer, and Political Activist

Doctor Rasheed Jahan (1905–52) belonged to the second generation of family and community reformers. The eldest of five daughters of Shaikh Abdullah and Waheed Jahan Begum of Aligarh, she attended the Aligarh Girls School and grew up in a household where all women pursued educational and literary endeavours. Her mother and aunts taught at Aligarh Girls' School and contributed to Urdu periodicals, including their own publication, Khatun. Born into a family that championed Muslim women's education, she was exposed to discussions on women's education, curricula, purdah, and the significance of secular education at the Aligarh women's meetings. Their home became a centre for activities and discussions concerning women's education and women's rights (Jalil 2014a, 2014b; Singh 2014; Noor 2020). Rasheed Jahan's friend and sister-in-law, Hamida Saiduzzafar, recalls in her autobiography that Rasheed Jahan once remarked, 'We have slept on the mattress of women's education and covered ourselves with the quilt of women's education from the time we first came to consciousness.' "It is evident that her household was not a traditional Muslim household," writes Hamida. She grew up reading Rashid-ul-Khairi's and Maulana Hali's works, as well as articles published in periodicals such as Tehzib-un-Niswan and Ismat. At school, she was exposed to the work of nationalist authors like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Gandhi, as well as English writers like Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters. It is therefore not surprising that her writings demonstrate both an investment in and a questioning of these competing traditions. Over time, she also applied this critical examination to the figure of the female reformer—women like herself who

inherited a legacy of ‘education and uplift’ from their fathers and brothers. Rasheed Jahan’s progressive views on women’s education and her non-traditional household were reflected in her writings, which challenged the patriarchal norms of society. Her work continues to inspire and empower women in South Asia and beyond. She was receptive to both the intellectually stimulating environment and the political turmoil of the time (Khanna 2018, 2021). Rasheed Jahan, who was introduced to the nationalist movement by a school teacher, remained devoted to the nationalist cause throughout her life. In 1919, when she was only 14 years old, she decided to wear white khaddar (Gandhi endorsed ‘Khadi’ as the national handloom of India) and sing patriotic songs aloud whenever nationalist processions passed (Jalil 2014a,2014b). Considering that her parents remained aloof from the political movement, her support was especially noteworthy. In 1922, she graduated from high school and enrolled at Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow to study science. While there, she distinguished herself as the author of Urdu and English short stories that were published in the college literary magazine. In 1924, she enrolled at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi, where she organized her fellow medical students to conduct literacy classes and free medical clinics for the city’s poor women. She earned her medical degree in 1929, specializing in obstetrics and gynaecology, and then joined the UP medical service, which brought her back to Lucknow. She became acquainted with the group of young Urdu writers who were politically aware, which included Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmad Ali, and Sahibzada Mahmuduzzaman. In 1934, she married Mahmuduzzafar. During her time in Amritsar, she interacted with a group of Lahore-based Marxist intellectuals, including the renowned poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. She was instrumental in organising the first meeting of the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA, henceforth PWA) in 1936. In 1937, she and her husband relocated to Dehradun, where she became deeply involved in PWA activities. From that point forward, her life was divided between her career as a gynaecologist, her political activity in the Communist Party, her literary career, her role as editor of the political magazine ‘Chingari,’ and her family life.Physically weakened, she recovered from a thyroidectomy in 1944 with difficulty. In 1949, she was arrested alongside other prominent Communist Party members. Her life ended prematurely in 1952. After her untimely death from cancer in 1952, many of her works were published posthumously. Her stories are notable for the social themes they depict. The position of women in the family and society, as well as the relationship between people and disease and medical care (or the lack thereof),

are recurring themes in Rashid's writings (Jalil 2014b: 1-51; Khanna 2018, 2021; Mukherjee 2018).

The literary works of Rasheed Jahan frequently raise inquiries that parallel the renowned reflections of Frantz Fanon regarding the potential drawbacks of possessing a collective sense of national identity. Rasheed Jahan's multifaceted professional pursuits, including political activism, literary endeavors, and medical practice, frequently converged as she advanced her comprehensive feminist and socialist objectives during the 1930s (Jalil 2014b: 52-107). It is noteworthy that the author's literary pieces are characterized by the convergence of race, religion, and politics, which serves as a fundamental motif. In the absence of a genuine nationalization movement that encompasses wealth redistribution, the establishment of novel social relations, and tangible improvements in the populace's quality of life, the nation, which played a pivotal role in the struggle against colonialism, will swiftly devolve into an oppressive entity. According to Fanon, the intellectual's efficacy in fulfilling their role is contingent upon their engagement in a dialectical process. This is a crucial aspect. This process must establish the prerequisites for agency and facilitate greater awareness among individuals that the ultimate source of power lies with the people themselves rather than any mystical or supernatural force. Rasheed Jahan's narratives elucidate the challenges and possible drawbacks inherent in the endeavor of cultivating feminist awareness among the middle class. Utilizing her medical expertise and prior experiences, she composed literature pertaining to the health and societal predicaments faced by women, particularly those who were subjugated and victimized by the patriarchal establishment. In addition, she leveraged her medical expertise to produce written works that were characterized by authenticity and precision in their portrayal of the human anatomy and sexual behavior. The complexity of comprehending Rasheed Jahan's narratives is heightened by her interactions with individuals from diverse social strata (Gopal 2005: 9; Jalil 2014b: 52-107).

## III

## The Progressive Writers' Association, the Communist Party and Jahan's Writings

This section of the study aims to investigate the motivational factors that underlie the writings of Jahan, with a particular focus on the influence of the PWA and the Communist Party. Behind the veil, Muslim women have a unique perspective on the world. Finding out what drives or inspires people to have such a worldview

is crucial. At the cusp of nationalism, the Communist-inspired literary and cultural revolution of the post-1930s sparked the imaginations of Muslim women, most of whom came from privileged backgrounds in Lucknow, Aligarh, and the surrounding areas, where Muslims were not rigidly bound to their own traditions and were open to the shifts in society brought on by colonialism (Mahmud 1996; Jalil 2014b: 1-51; Loomba 2019; Mukherjee 2018). Socialist ideology has been quietly creeping into the intellectual arena of those trying to analyse India's social, economic, national, and international challenges ever since the Bolshevik Revolution broke out. As this understanding expanded, it rippled out into the intellectual and cultural spheres. People whose worldview was shaped by Soviet propaganda were inclined to the left and self- identified as Communists (Coppola 1988; Ahmed 2006; Jalil 2014b: 52-107; Khanna 2021). Their study aimed to compare the socioeconomic causes of India's poor with the impact of imperialism and fascism on the independence movement. The Communists, in their fight against fascism, amassed a slew of prominent authors and thinkers who sought to define freedom for the masses via their writings, performances, and activities (Roy 2014; Singh 2014; Jalil 2014b: 52-107; Mukherjee 2018; Noor 2020).

In the intellectual climate of the mid-1930s, the PWA arose as a front for writers who adhered to Communist ideology. Membership in the PWA was limited to Communists. Anuradha Roy (2014) describes: "It was a broad-based movement, consisting of left-radicals and left-liberals, but also many not-so-left and non-left intellectuals and writers standing against fascism and to that extent believing in the interconnectedness between arts and politics and aligning themselves with the Communists. Thus, the new culture was given an organized shape and gradually crystallized into a cultural movement with strong national and international links. It was a movement in the sense that it was based on the perception of a set of common goals by a collectivity, at least a sense of collective commitment". A large number of writers and intellectuals spontaneously engaged themselves with the movement in response to the political turmoil India was going through. Realizing the grimness of socio-political veracity and connecting it with creative practices, they launch the PWA project to resist fascism and for human welfare in particular. All these political activists and art practitioners usually called themselves 'progressive'. It is important to note that, though they hailed from a highbrow walk of life, they paid utmost attention to the problems of the poor and ordinary people. With their thinking faculty, they prefer to not only confine themselves within the intellectual and aesthetic

exercise of educated ones but rather reach down to the masses through their cultural activities and inspire the fight for a better society (Roy 2014;Jalil 2014b: 52-107; Mukherjee 2018; Noor 2020).

However, the type of "progressiveness" these authors' activists intended to convey in relation to and for whom remains open to debate. The term "progressive" was defined in two different ways by Talat Ahmed (2006) and Priyamvada Gopal (2005). While Gopal characterizes the Marxist or Progressive as belonging to "North Indian Muslims from Urdu-speaking middle- and upper-class families. They were English-educated, fluently bilingual colonial subjects strongly committed to anti-colonialism; members of relatively elite social groupings invested in a variety of Marxist and socialist projects; littérateurs who were devoted to the literary craft while urgently concerned with social and political transformation; and, last but not least, Muslims who were engaged in a critique of Islamist orthodoxy even as Hindu majoritarianism threatened to exclude Muslim communities from the life of the Indian nation" (Gopal 2005:7). Ahmed elaborates, "PWA defined progressivism by the position one took in relation to the key questions of the day. As a body of radical writers, they stood in opposition to the colonial project and therefore identified with a rising nationalist movement.… The essence of progressivism also defined what type of society would emerge post-independence, and in this respect their vision was for some form of socialist society" (Ahmed 2006:8). To summarize Ahmed's and Gopal's perspectives, we can say that the Progressive Writers' Movement emerged as a literary collective agenda centered on the leftist intellectual and literary culture in colonial South Asia. Under this rubric, authors tackled anti-imperialism, economic exploitation, misogyny, and other social ills in their works. The women of the PWA epitomized the organization's values and ideals, while the men are more often recognized for their impact on the development of the Urdu literary canon. Rasheed Jahan's progressiveness is evident in her writings and activism, both of which were designed to tap into the zeitgeist of the masses by rejecting dogma (Ali 2000; Anagol 2005; Ahmed 2006; Bano 2012; Jalil 2014a).

Once again, Jahan's writings show the dominance of the intertwined effects of PWA and Communism. There is no denying the inextricable historical and necessary connection between women's liberation and the communist movement in India, as evidenced by numerous first-person accounts. Gopal (2005), Ahmed (2006), Loomba (2019), and Khanna (2018, 2021) are just a few of the literary

and critical authorities who attest to the ways in which Jahan's writings challenge accepted understandings of individual freedom and gender roles. Her political upbringing and professional knowledge have such a profound effect on her fictional world that the colonial government has banned her short story on the grounds that literature and politics are inextricably intertwined in it. In her writings, she investigates the potential enslavement of women of all social backgrounds by marriage and housework.

Ania Looomba (2019) calls Jahan a "new kind of communist woman who was attracted to a canvas larger than the ones women had been hitherto allowed to paint." Further, Loomba (2019) mentions that a communist woman like Jahan, who actively fights against inequality and for her own social and personal freedom, has the potential to serve as a model for female protagonists in works of criticism and fiction. Jahan's political, personal, and professional life served as inspiration for Yashpal's female protagonist Shailbala in Dada Kamred and Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem "*shadab*" (romanticism) and "*inquilab*" (revolution).

After Angaarey (Embers/ Burning coals) was released in 1932, the campaign against It adopted Jahan as its primary symbol (Jalil 2014: 108-145). The published volume was then banned, and she received a "fatwa" from extremists. That a Muslim woman would have the courage to not only offer a stern disparagement against Islamic notions of culture and orthodoxy but also to spontaneously flag out the female oppression relating to her body in writings seems indigestible to the religious zealots. Her work in Angaarey paves the way for a new literary public sphere in Urdu literature by establishing her as an authority on topics like women's bodies and sexuality and on modern, scientific, progressive, moral, and epistemological ideas. The book's radical content has earned her the sobriquet "Angaareywali." Her unconventional path in the Urdu literary world makes her a role model for progressive women but a danger for traditionalists. She was appropriately dubbed the first "angry young woman" of Urdu literature due to the echo of her unconventional views in her writings and the phonetic similarity between "Angaarey" and "Angry" (Coppola & Zubair 1987; Bano 2012; Jalil 2014b: 108-145).

## IV

## Construing Rasheed Jahan's Works and the Characters therein

Rasheed Jahan's literary works, including *Mera Ek Safar* (One of My Journeys), *Sadak* (Street), *Chor* (Thief), Safar (Journey), *Faisla* (Judgement), and *Mujrim*

*Kaun*? (Who is the Culprit?), demonstrate a prolonged involvement with women as political and civic entities and provide a critical analysis of the colonial encounter, in contrast to some of her other narratives (Rasheed 1937, 1947, 1988; Bano 2012; Jalil 2014a). The literary work *Mera Ek Safar* (Jahan 1937) commences with a depiction of a female protagonist (the narrator) in a state of haste, endeavouring to board a train. As she arrived at the station, she witnessed the train departing and proceeded to elevate her sari and engage in a sprint. Thus the first scene depicts the narrator, a woman, rushing to catch a train. In the first few lines, we learn that everyone on the bridge is staring in amazement as she sprints down the stairs in only two or three strides. Her sari trailing behind her, and she breathing like an ironsmith as her hair whips crazily behind her and her clip falls off, sending strands of hair lying into her face. She trips and falls while trying to skip the final flight of stairs. She's aware that people are staring and laughing at her the whole time; when she trips, people rush to help her, but she gets up quickly, saying, "Taking my red face out of my hair, I shrieked, "The Train." She rushes into the first carriage, which is full of men, as the guard smiles and holds the train up for her. Even though she is the target of leering and laughter, she maintains her focus on the outside world until the train pulls into its first stop. She descends here, buys a ticket, and makes her way to the ladies section. At that location, she is exposed to unwelcome gazes and ridicule, prompting her to maintain a fixed gaze towards the outside scenery until the train reaches its initial destination. Upon arrival, the individual disembarks from the transportation vehicle, procures a ticket, and proceeds to occupy a seat within the designated women's area. The introductory scenario is of considerable length. It's only a few paragraphs long, but it goes into considerable depth about the narrator's relationship with her body, from her perception of how others see her to her knowledge of how she moves and how she fits into the urbanised and mechanised space around her, such as the platform, the bridge, the staircase, and the train. She faces new kinds of questions and comments in the ladies section, such as "you are a student?" 'Yes'. Do you have a spouse? 'No'. I'm curious about your caste. 'Chamar'. I responded with a hearty belly laugh. Upon entering the densely populated women's compartment, the narrator promptly observes two distinct clusters of women, one comprising Hindus and the other Muslims, seated in diametrically opposite positions. The small space in the zenana (lit., ladies) carriage is a pressure cooker where differences of class, educational level, gender, religious community, and caste come to a boil. It is possible to read this space as symbolic of the public spaces of the nation. Both the questions posed by

the fellow travellers to the narrator and her own observations point to the salience of identity and difference in these spaces. When the Muslim woman with the nose pendant rises to go to the restroom, the edge of her long scarf touches one of the Hindus sitting on a piece of luggage. In the compartment, there erupts an explosive turf battle that is resonant with other kinds of conflicts. The metaphors and imagery are drawn from established discourses of power and possession, and soon the language of religious and communal identifications— "we Hindus and we Muslims"—enters the fray.

The narrator reads the scene as a 'field of battle' that is fuelled by nationalist sentiments:

"The woman who was sitting next to me wanted to reach the field of battle but couldn't find space. She was going mad with patriotic zeal. One by one, even those who are on the sidelines enter the war zone, jostling to get a piece of the action. Even those who had been taking only a verbal part in the fight finally lost control and entered the enemy's territory. As the conflict spreads, the narrator sits tight and keeps watching: 'If anything was missing, it would be cries of "Allah-ho-Akbar" and "Har Har Mahadev". As beef flies in the direction of the Hindus and the possessions of the Muslims are thrown out of the windows, one woman is pushed and falls on the narrator, while another's hand descends on her short hair. She gets up and leaps towards the emergency stop chain. 'Ah, my dear Shakuntala. If only you could have heard me. You would hear that Zubeida too can lecture.' The proliferation of metaphors of war, nationalism, patriotism, and leadership in the narrator's critical observations suggests that Rasheed Jahan sees the manner of women's emergence into colonial public spaces as problematically influenced by patriarchal and masculinist discourses, in particular by religious and communal chauvinism. The narrator's initial passivity is transformed into an intervention that is simultaneously problematic and fantastical. Zubeida threatens to hand all the fighting women over to the police at the next station, a threat that strikes immediate fear and subservience into her listeners. She asks them to examine their own condition—clothes torn, some of them half naked now, others with their ears red from being pulled. Shouting at the top of her voice, she berates the Hindu women for hypocritically practicing 'untouchability' while wearing Gandhian clothes and the Muslims for waging Jihad.

Asserting that it is really those women who cannot put their moral authority to good ends who are useless to society, Zubeida addresses the oldest Muslim woman:

"Had you scolded them in the first place, why would this situation have even come about? As a final act of punishment, she asks the fellow travellers to ask forgiveness of each other. If they don't, she will turn them all over to the authorities when the train comes to a halt. As she oscillates between persuasion and intimidation, Zubeida is always conscious of the situation as a spectacle and of herself as involved in a didactic performance. As she tells her friend, 'it was a scene worth seeing'. The repeated use of the English terms 'lecture' and 'scene', drawn from educational and cinematic vocabulary, respectively, indicates that the activist is aware of both the didactic and performative dimensions of her actions. The narrator is confident of her own moral and intellectual superiority. To one of the women who challenges her authority with the question, Why? Are you the government? Zubeida's reply is 'I wish I was'.

Her account is an uncompromising fantasy of disciplining, punishing, and reforming the less intelligent, less cultured, and, crucially, the rural women steeped in false consciousness. As she makes them ask forgiveness of each other, she actually marvels at her own powers in getting them to do so (Gopal, 2005:55-59). Almost all her literary female protagonists bear the real life of Jahan, which ultimately confuses her reader to separate the writer from these women characters who are the counterfeit of the personality she is or aspires to be. Zubeida in Mera Ek Safar exemplifies the same. She speculates how the ladies compartment of the train immediately turns into a space for communalism with a slight provocation, but with her amazing presence of mind, she has been able to control a volatile situation with emotional appeal that convinces the women to realise their shortfalls. Jahan here pleads for female solidarity and sisterhood, which later emerge as a feminist agenda in women's writings. Neetu Khanna (2018) tries to postulate Jahan's smart use of gender-segregated train compartments as the epicentre of communal violence as well as class conflict. Zubeida's movement from the first carriage to the small zenana carriage, surpassing the disciplinary male gaze to the middle-class gaze of female passengers to that of her own elitist gaze of female flaneusede, notes the class consciousness and Communist influence frequently traced in Jahan's writings. Zubeida's experiences of male gaze and social and gender difference in the micro-space of a train signifies the macro-cosmic representation of the country itself.

The story Sadak (Street) (Jahan, 1937:74-80) is written as a reply by Shakuntala to Zubeida. The female characters in both stories are intellectually appealing, for these women are role models who fulfil the writer's intrinsic urge for self

assessment and social change. Shakuntala is visiting her maternal uncle's home in Amritsar during her Dussehra holidays. She describes the scene visible from the house as a theatre continuously providing the enactment of different incidents. There would be a recurrent thumping of drums, either because a religious procession was passing or because a marriage party would be bellowing (even in the middle of the night). How could anyone possibly sleep if Seth Jamuna Lal's son or Sheikh Jamaludin's daughter were getting married? The ruckus caused by horse carriages and songs full of abuse in the local language kept one awake all the time. Last night, a maulvi (lit., expert in Islamic Law) was addressing the people, and his high-pitched speech attacked everything. Schools, colleges, women's education, husband-wife relations, prayers, purdah, sexual permissiveness, and women's vulgar appearances—nothing was spared! These are our religious instructors, who find space even in their religious sermons to refer to women's bodies in the most obnoxious manner (Jahan, 1937: 76). As the sermon continued, the scene was suddenly transformed into a zone for religious sloganeering. The cries of "Allah-ho-Akbar" ("Allah is the greatest") were matched by cries of "Sat-Sri-Akaal" ("God is truth") from the other end: "Mussalman Ka Bedha Ghark, Sikhon Ka Bedha Paar" ("Let the Muslimship sink while the Sikh ship sails") (Jahan, 1937: 77). The narrator does not identify with the religious metaphors, and her civic responsibility and communist leanings are expressed in the following manner: nobody says: "down with exploitation, down with poverty, liberty for the poor Indians, liberty for their children, freedom from hunger." Her consciousness of linguistic chauvinism along with religious and communal identification is discernible when the narrative highlights that even children are hauled into the encounters. The Hindu children shout, "You will now have to become proficient in Hindi," while the Muslim children yell back, "We will now have to pull down Hindi." No facet of the social order is spared from this communalization. Hindu and Muslim women ridicule each other: "Muslim women must surely be suffering from deficiencies, or else why would they be hiding themselves under the burqa?" Muslim women spew scorn on the Hindus, saying, "They have neither beauty, prestige, nor respect. They have loose morals! See how they go about exposing themselves."

She questions that, given this extremely volatile environment, what progress could be possible from shallow attempts such as Hindu Muslim Unity Conferences? (Jahan, 1937: 79). Standing on that porch, she not only saw the spectacle of religious frenzy but also the economic divides: men with sweat flowing from their bodies carrying heavy loads, those who have no employment,

and those who live a life of plenty and zip past them in cars. When I see the appalling state of affairs, I tremble, but I console myself by saying, How long? (Jahan, 1937: 80). Her message emerges sharp and clear—there would only be negative implications of these developments for the nationalist movement and the women's movement in India.

Rasheed Jahan's critique of colonialism and its oppressive legal and administrative apparatus, as well as her commitment to social transformation, emerge passionately in the story entitled "Chor" (Thief) (Jahan, 1977: 49). Her forays into the public sphere as a respectable upper-class woman, a professional, and a lady doctor with access to knowledge and opportunities to interact with people from all classes enabled her to bring a good deal of pragmatism into her writing. The story, like most of her other narratives, is precise and sharp, offering an insight into the psyche of a thief and his reading of contemporary society. It is ten at night, and the lady doctor (by now all alone!) sat in her clinic browsing through the pages of a medical journal, interrupted suddenly by the arrival of a man with a child in his arms. Feeling considerably annoyed at her nurse for having left the entrance door open, she blurts angrily at the unwelcome visitor that her schedule for visiting patients was over and that he could either come the next day or see another doctor (Jahan, 1977: 50). The man's businesslike attitude that he would pay for her services and that she had once cured another of his ailing relatives, and his blatant reply that his routine of work did not permit him to come earlier, leave her speechless. While examining the child, she interacts with the visitor and discovers that he was a thief who had burgled her house as well. She asks him bluntly, "Why do you steal? To which his reply is, Madam, we all have our different vocations! "His tone is rustic and colloquial, and what emerges from their dialogue is a criminal's account of the corruption in the law enforcement agencies. Vehemently rebuking the police, he asserts: All these police officers are corrupt. It is they who inform me every time a raid is to take place (Jahan, 1977: 52). The lady doctor's anger in the narrative is surpassed by her amazement at the thief's professionalism, the lack of a moral sentiment, and his disclosures that the police, fully aware of his actions, would actually demand a share bounty boon. The lady doctor, with all her access to modern scientific knowledge to the legal apparatus, appears powerless before the thief. The loss of agency, the failure to seek redress for the loss she had incurred, the shift in her emotions from anger to revulsion, and then to curiosity and inaction, reflect the writer's dilemma as a colonial subject.

The lady doctor's ambiguities were in fact conditioned not by a simplistic project of punishing the thief but by a much more developed understanding of how social and political relations could be radically transformed (Gopal, 2005:43). Her subject position as a professional healer simultaneously assumes the role of a social critic when she looks around at the sickness of society: 'What about those criminals who go scot-free without the possibility of a warrant ever being issued in their name? Thefts can be of various kinds: black marketing, appropriating the value of other people's labour, colonising other lands... are these also not thievery, in different forms…..though?' (Jahan, 1977:55). The process of elaborating the symbolic role of the medical practitioner, concerned not only with human sickness but the sickness of society as a whole, portrays her stance that the fight against colonialism had to be fought on several fronts. Her anger at the exploitative nature of colonial rule and frustration with mainstream nationalists emerge subtly when she seeks to rationalise her actions by stating: 'There are those bigger thieves who reside in plush and sprawling homes, enjoy high positions, and exercise (or are preparing to exercise) power in the future. Kaman was arrogant for having bribed the police with only a meagre sum of money. These exploiters were several steps ahead of him; the police and the army drew salaries from them. They not only behave haughtily but also issue commands from above. A thief is not only the person who steals in the darkness of the night, but all those white collar people who oppress and deprive others of their rights.' Rasheed Jahan's writings highlight the multiplicities of intersecting conflicts.

She does not merely emphasise women's experiences within the home and family or portray anti colonial sentiment but poses the question as a choice between political freedom on the one hand and radical transformation on the other. One of her narratives that offer a scathing indictment of the status quo is "Safar" (Journey) (Jahan, 1977: 114-122). The story opens with the remarks of a disgruntled father, Chief Justice Sir Ataullah, about the behaviour of his younger son, Sayeed. In the narrative, colonial contact is reflected not just as a backdrop or context against which human dramas are enacted but as a central aspect of what the account has to say about identity, relationships, and culture. The narrative uses a multi-pronged approach to unravel the tensions, complexities, and nuances within colonial cultures. Rasheed Jahan explores colonial contact through the anxieties of Sir Ataullah, who has risen to the position of a judge under the colonial state as a result of the strenuous efforts made by him ever since his childhood. He recapitulates the difficult days when he took responsibility for his own education and, despite all odds, has been able to make a position for

himself in society. While Sir Ataullah's attitude reflects his smugness, the son is a rebel, and one may read their conversation in terms of the eternal conflict between unbridled individualism and social responsibility. The story illustrates the father's controlling and civilising role, as well as what he perceives to be his parental obligation to discipline and provide for his children.

His son views this as oppressive, dehumanising, and desolate in nature (Jahan, 1977: 115). The colonial experience is being challenged here not simply at the political or intellectual level but also on an emotional level. There are similarities between the "civilising mission' of colonialism and the father's patriarchal benevolence, both of which are regarded as repressive by the son. The son's disparagement towards colonialism is reflected in his outright rejection of all that the patriarch claims to have done for him; rather than having the rebel son narrate the encounters, the disclosures by the father depict the impact of the son's comments on the father's psyche (Jahan, 1977: 116).

In her story "Faisla" (Judgement) (Jahan, 1974: 39-59), Rasheed Jahan presents the image of a housewife who is educated, strong-willed, and nationalist in spirit and who easily moves within clearly modern settings. Safiya is the wife of Husn Mirza, who is a deputy superintendent of police. Safiya's mother had been widowed at an early age, and despite opposition, she had educated her daughters. Safiya was an educated, well-read woman brimming with individualism and self-confidence. She was incredibly committed to her ideals and was often teased by her husband as "usoolanbi" (Ms. Principled). She expresses her disapproval when her husband reads her letters without permission and argues with him that playing cards in the club was the same as the gambling that was so common on street corners. Aware of the prevailing tensions within the country, she views communalism as a social malaise that could not be treated by short-term measures like intensive policing and surveillance just to prevent a communal outbreak. She wanted a cure, a permanent solution. It was a disease that had infected society at large and required a long-term strategy for its amelioration (Jahan, 1974: 45). This was only possible with education and greater social awareness. Rasheed Jahan's depiction of women as enlightened and responsible subjects emerges prominently when Safiya accompanies her husband on one of his official tours. An efficient manager of domestic accounts, she maintains meticulous records of their expenditure on food, travel, and other purchases and is outraged when they are charged practically nothing for their stay in the village. The disclosure that British officials as well as Indians who frequently came on

tours with family and friends demanded services for which they were never adequately reimbursed leaves both Safiya and her husband feeling considerably guilty. Rasheed Jahan brings out the hypocrisy of the colonial state, which could not live up to its own ideals and the values it claimed were so dear to it (Jahan, 1974:51).

When Safiya confronts the collector's wife on the issue, she blurts out, "They are rogues; I always reduce their bills by half! All natives are dishonest...I mean the lower orders, the servants, coolies, etc." This racist statement becomes too much for Safiya to bear, and she snaps back at her in the presence of the collector's subordinates, exposing their hypocrisy (Jahan, 1974:54). In the concluding part of the narrative, even though her husband faces the wrath of his seniors, they remain determined, not yielding to the pressure of an apology by the authorities (Jahan, 1974:59). Jahan's writings illustrate the exploitative nature of British rule, where coercion and exploitation proceed along racist lines. Racial hierarchies provide the magic formula that allows capitalism to expand and find all the labour it needs, yet pay lower wages and allow even fewer freedoms than those given to the white working class (Loomba, 2005:109). The racial ideologies aimed at suppression express themselves not only through the economic sphere but also through the legal system. In her story, Mujrim Kaun? (Who is the Culprit?) (Jahan, 1977; 100-113). The violence and racism towards the colonial subject are predicated not on a ruthless universalism but on an inequitable relativism that justifies racial and geopolitical hierarchies (Gopal, 2005: 63). The narrative opens with the colonial perception of the colonised as 'galeez hindustaani' (filthy Indians) and "ghulaam (slaves), who were to be tamed by the coloniser. Two episodes are narrated simultaneously.

Robbins is an acclaimed judge, known and respected for his impartiality and honesty in the application of the Imperial laws. Robbins is, however, having an affair with one Mrs. Sylvia Black, who was the wife of Colonel Black. Their affair becomes the subject of fervent controversy when the Colonel launches a bitter tirade against the judge and even threatens to sue him. Such an open act of confrontation between two British officials becomes a source of embarrassment for the government, and it is only after an intervention by the governor that the issue is finally settled. The colonel would divorce his wife, and until then, Mrs. Black would be sent to England, after which Robbins could marry her. The second part of the narrative opens in the courtroom with Judge Robbins issuing

a verdict inflicting a three-year punishment on the villager Bhola (for having eloped with Gujariya, the wife of Mitro).

"Mitro! Gujariya is given back to you! Take the criminal away!" The verdict is announced, leaving the woman to wail inconsolably. There is an element of sarcasm in the story when the writer states that with an unfaltering judge like Robbins, what else could possibly be expected? (Jahan, 1977: 104). The third part of the narrative outlines the course of events at the party organised for Robbins, who is going home to wed Sylvia. The racist streak in the thoughts of most Europeans is expressed in Robbins' observation: "The natives are emotional, like animals! Had there not been the fear of death sentences in this uncivilized country, a murder would be committed every minute... Thanks to our laws and our administration, there is peace in this barbaric land! It is our legal system that has provided a sense of equality in the administration of justice in the country". Robbins adds that "I can say for myself that I do not distinguish between British and natives, and that law is applicable equally to all." Rashid shatters the hypocrisy of the "civilised/colonial rule" when news reaches that a woman had first set her husband's house on fire and then set herself on fire on account of an unfair judgement imposed upon her (Jahan, 1977: 112). To evoke irony in the story, Robbins is innocently questioned by his British friend about whether, if there had been an Englishman in place of the native, he would have been subjected to a similar treatment.Robbins is rendered speechless, and the story concludes with officers scurrying away so as not to discuss the matter further in front of the "uncivil natives" (Jahan, 1977: 113).

## V

## Some Closing Observations: New Possibility in Jahan's Writings

Rasheed Jahan's writings, which questioned the status quo, reflected her liberal views on women's education and her unconventional family. It was Rasheed Jahan who penned the first novels and short stories by a Muslim woman in the Urdu language. Ishmat Chugtai considered Jahan her mentor. Just as her first book, Angaarey (Embers) inspired and empowered women across South Asia and beyond, so too do her later works. Her works trace a crucial lineage of transnational feminist thought, straddling the divide between Muslim feminist activism and a Marxist anti-colonial perspective. Jahan's signature style in her feminist writing is her embrace of socialist materialism and the incorporation of

that ideology within the framework of Urdu literary forms infused with gender perspectives of colonialism and Muslim rigidity. Her writing reveals a feminist phenomenology of resistance, disgust, and social transformation in the face of colonialism. Her 'progressive' quality is reflected in her often-criticising depictions of women's gynaecological health, sexuality, hygiene, and childbirth. According to Khanna (2021), her feminism "constitutes a renewed engagement with materialist articulations of the revolutionary consciousness" (Khanna, 2, 2021). This allows for the possibility of materialist thought at the intersection of historical and politically gendered experiences. Jahan, a committed feminist, sees revolution and reformation not merely as a transformative tools for social awareness, but as a predictable instruments for a better society. Feminist writing by Jahan, however, sheds important light on the development of Urdu literature and on the different shades of struggles of variegated women for recognition and autonomy in a literary field where such things are often contested. She is a progressive writer whose works, because of their contemporary relevance, generate a brazen modernity that aids in foreseeing the future, proclaiming its contemporaneity, directly ushering a better future, and inspiring the future.

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