

**Enslaving Domestic Space: A Reading of Rashid Jahan’s “Behind the Veil”****K. Raja Kumar**, Ph. D. Research Scholar (Part Time – External)

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**Abstract**

The paper attempts to read Rashid Jahan’s “Behind the Veil” (1932) as a pioneer feminist text that sought to expose the pitfalls of patriarchal world view that enslaves women domestically. Rashid Jahan (1905 – 1952) was an early Urdu writer who was inspired by feminism and Marxism. An active member of the Progressive Writers’ Movement and the Indian People’s Theatre Association, she wrote several short stories and radio plays which were experimental in form and radical in theme for their time. They deal with the circumscribed status of women in Muslim households. “Behind the Veil” (Parde ke Peeche) is one such play.

“Behind the Veil” is a radio-play scripted in the form of a dialogical engagement between two Muslim women - Aftab Begum and Muhammadi Begum. Both are from an affluent Muslim family. One of the two, Muhammadi Begum, has been rendered weak and frail by an early marriage and frequent continuous pregnancies against her wish. Despite her weak and failing health, she continues to get pregnant because her husband wants a male child that is eluding them. He also forces her to undergo various cosmetic surgeries to keep her physically attractive. Shocked and aghast, at the pathetic situation of Muhammadi, Aftab

Begum convinces her to see a doctor who immediately understands what is happening. Both the doctor and Aftab Begum, suggest the husband adopt birth control measures. But this is ignored.

Keywords: women, patriarchy, domestic, pregnancy, freedom

Rashid Jahan was an early Urdu writer who broke religious barriers and pioneered Muslim women writings in pre-independent India. She was born in a radical Muslim family that not only established schools for Muslim girls. but also encouraged their children to be progressive and broadminded. Rashid Jahan's consciousness, as a woman-writer and as a social reformer was moulded by feminism and Marxism, which were early influences on her, and her education and training as a physician. Rashid Jahan's short stories and plays focused on women issues, particularly Muslim women issues. Her parents, Sheikh Abdullah and Wajid Jahan, were among the early Muslim reformists to voice concern for the education of Muslim women. Jahan's father founded the widely circulated Urdu journal, named *Khatun* in 1914 for women and her mother wrote in it regularly. Following the work of her parents, Rashid Jahan joined the Indian Women's Organization which had been formed in 1917 and All India Women's Conference which was formed by the Indian National Congress in 1927, and began to write short stories and one act plays. In 1935 and 1936, Jahan was actively involved in the establishing of the Progressive Writers' Association. She worked to organize the First Progressive Writers' Conference in Lucknow during in 1936. While she worked as an active member of the Communist Party of India, she also continued her service as a gynaecologist and also as the editor of the Communist newspaper-cum-literary journal Chingari.

Rashid Jahan's one-act play in Urdu titled "Parde ke Peechey" has been translated to English as "Behind the Veil". The play was later anthologised in *Angaaray (Burning Coals)* in 1932.

The play is written in the form of a dialogic conversation between Muhammadi Begum, a

young married Muslim woman and Aftab Begum, her guest. The two women begin to critically discuss how women are enslaved domestically within marriage and also explore the idea whether marriage, child bearing and conjugal relations are the essential core of a woman's existence and its purpose.

When the play begins, Muhammadi Begum is introduced as a woman of thirty-two, who was married rather early, i.e. at the age of seventeen. Due to her frail health, multiple pregnancies and the indifferent attitude of her husband, she has lost her earlier looks and health. Her declining health, though obviously visible does not draw any attention from her husband. Furthermore, there are consequential effects of her ill health on the children: one such significant issue is related to her motherhood: Muhammadi Begum is unable to care for her children well. They look "pale and sickly, as though they are victims of starvation" (202), points out Aftab Begum. They also fall behind in their school studies. Muhammadi Begum feels that her husband's needs take precedence over the needs of her children, and so, she must recognise and satisfy his physical needs, rather than fulfil her duty as a mother and care for the children. Even though her physical condition is fast 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 so that her husband "would get the same pleasure he might from a new wife" (211). These reveal that the wife is not given the agency to control her own body and its functions. She readily accepts her husband's wish for a male child in the form of multiple pregnancies. It seems to her as if her body does not belong to her and she has been alienated from it. The man has taken over her body. 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 an "internalised exile"(200) where the body feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency" (209). Muhammadi Begum yields to her husband's frequent sexual demands because he has threatened her that "he will marry another woman and bring her home" (202), if she

rejected his demands. Yet, the husband he has sexual liaisons outside their marriage as well, and Muhammadi Begum is aware of them, and is helpless; she is complicit in her own slavery. She is a woman trapped in a relationship that has been defined by men. In 1963, Betty Friedman coined the term “the feminine mystique” in her book titled by the same term. She uses the term to explain the systemic violence embedded in the assumption that women that women would find happiness and contentment in domestic work, marriage, sexual surrender and child bearing and child rearing. Muhammadi Begum is a typical feminine prototype.

The traditional and patriarchal attitude towards the place of women in the institution of marriage is expressed well by Aftab Begum, who thinks that Muhammadi Begum is happily married. She tells Muhammadi Begum: “Who can be as fortunate as you? ... you have a home, a husband, children, everything” (202). At this stage, Aftab is not aware of the sufferings of Muhammadi. Yet, as Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, what transcendence is possible for a woman who is symbolically locked up in a bedroom. Yet, 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. When an economically bonded woman becomes an integral of the patriarchal structure of married life, she has become a subservient entity; she is alienated from her own body, is distanced from her own personal needs and loses control or power over it.

During their conversation Muhammadi Begum and Aftab Begum discuss the plight of other women as well. Gradually, Aftab Begum shifts from her earlier stance about the ‘fortunate position’ of married women in patriarchal households, to discussing the diverse ways in which the institution is unfair, suppressive and exploitative in nature as far as women are concerned. Both the women reach a point where they understand and agree that “everyone

[every woman] has their own troubles” (204). The reference is to every married woman or girl of a marriageable age.

Muhammadi Begum and Aftab Begum discuss the muted lives of women in polygamous marriages. They discuss an old man, known to them, who has been married the third time to a young and beautiful girl, old enough to be his daughter. The practice of polygamous unions has always placed women in advantageous positions. This practice which allows men the privilege to have multiple wives, also permits unequal gender relations. Jahan reveals how men can use polygamous marriage structure to their advantage by citing the case of Razia, Muhammadi Begum’s cousin. Through Razia, Jahan elaborates reveals the desire of an old man to marry a much younger girl only for sexual gratification. When Muhammadi Begum learns that her husband has been writing amorous letters to her cousin Razia, she confronts her husband. There is no jealousy between the two cousins but only fear: while Razia is scared of her cousin’s possible retaliation, Muhammadi Begum is outraged and fearful she would lose her husband and her livelihood and hold in life. Economically she is dependent on her husband and the husband knows this dependency and uses this to his advantage. Therefore, he is nonchalant and overbearing: “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). The husband justifies his behaviour 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. Therefore Haider says that in numerous ways, the play “offers a variety of demystifications of traditional and socially expected female roles, for instance, wifehood, not as it is traditionally expected to be fulfilling and nurturing but as enslaving” ( 204).

Rashid Jahan is known for not only raising the subservient situation of women in domestic space, but is also known for suggesting possible courses of action for remedy. In this regard, Hamidi Saiduzzafar comments that, “She [Rashid Jahan] 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 is Rashid Jahan’s socio-feminist approach to the situation of women in patriarchal society.

As a social reformer, Rashid Jahan aims to bring about positive changes with regard to women’s lives, their freedom to choose a spouse, a liberal approach towards marriage, women’s education and conscionable behaviours in conjugal relations. There are certain possible answers to the situation which she wishes to communicate to her reader/audience through her writings. Through this play, particularly, she highlights that it is only when women seek roles outside the domestic space and pursue a professional career, would they be able to gain agency over their body and actions. As Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out in her seminal book *The Second Sex*, as long as women are economically dependent on men for their daily needs, political freedom or social equality has no meaning.

The play ends with the stage direction: “The sound of the Alan can be heard wafting in from the mosque” (211). Rashid Jahan might have ended the play on this note to suggest the pervasive influence of religion in deciding personal behaviour and also the role of religion in perpetuating certain unjust systems and values. Through *Behind the Veil* Rashid Jahan conveys that progressive ideas and movements can encourage and disseminate positive values to achieve change and social transformation.

Rashid Jahan also wrote about the ubiquitous male gaze that can penetrate through the veil and through dresses. In her short story “A Visit to Delhi” (*Dilli ki sair*) she describes how there is no dignity for women’ physic in public places. She describes how the male gaze invades the privacy of dress or even a veil:

Well, we sat in the train from here and reached Delhi. There ‘he’ met some wretched station master acquaintance of his. Leaving me near the luggage, ‘he’ vanished. And I, perched on the luggage, wrapped in a burqa, there I sat. First this damned burqa, then these cursed men. Men are anyway no good but when they see a woman sitting like this they just circle around her. One damn fellow coughs, another hurls a vulgar remark. And I... breathless with fear. And so hungry... that only God knows. And the Delhi station! Bua, even the Fort would not be as huge. Wherever one looked, one saw nothing but the station, the railway lines, engines, and goods trains. And what scared me the most were those men!” (123)

As Rakhshanda Jalil says, “She [Rashid Jahan] boldly attacked the social set-up, patriarchy and its supporting culture through her writings; bringing in deeper questions of body, sexuality, public spaces, and women” (56). Therefore Rashid Jahan may be called a rebel with a cause.

The title “Behind the Veil” is significant here. As Priyamvada Gopal explains,

The “veil” in the title thus can be read as a conscious attempt on the part of the writer to reduce the binary between inner/outer, i.e. private/public, as her female protagonist unveils her mind to her confidante and thus touches upon various issues that remain veiled from the knowledge formation system – the issues of contraception, unhealthy sexual practices, breastfeeding etc. At another level, the story unveils the silence and mysticism that surrounds female body. (40)

Here Rashid Jahan seems to suggest that the issue of women encompasses various issues such as contraception, economic freedom, domestic violence and the role of religion and other oppressive structures. Discussing issues related to women’s body at public forums in those times was not easy and could be looked upon as immoral or blasphemous. But with the development of women’s movement and the secular discourse of nationalism, talking about

the personal and individual issues related to women were slowly becoming recognised. Even then, there were no safe platforms for such discussions. In such a situation, Progressive Writers' Movement provided the platforms and scope for discussions. Rashid Jahan was educated and given the courage to speak her mind by her radical parents. It was also the feminist movements, the nationalist movement and the Marxist thought that helped her understand the issues at stake. 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 the second half of twenty century. Unfortunately, Rashid Jahan was not alive to witness the fruits of her efforts.

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