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Rashid Jahan: A Writer Created by her Surroundings

Perna Raj

Research Scholar,
The Department of English & MEL
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow, U.P, India

Abstract

Rashid Jahan's repertoire as a writer is not very impressive when it comes to its literary finesse but the themes of her works which are driven by the socio-political and cultural contexts, are very candid and progressive. The interpretation of her surroundings, which shape her writings the way they are, is very crucial to understanding of her works. She is a product of her times and the sole purpose of her life was to rebel against the hypocrisies of the society and uplift the society for the good of everyone. Rashid Jahan brings freshness of realistic insights, logic and scientific inclination to otherwise romantic Urdu Literature. This paper is an attempt to focus on the surroundings and times of Rashid Jahan which are the blood and soul of Rashid Jahan's works.

Keywords: Reformer, Rebel, Trailblazer, Disillusionment, Polity, Caste-system, Hypocrisy

Ever since Rashid Jahan has begun her literary career as a playwright and short-story writer, she is never known as a literary luminary, yet she has never ceased to be a controversial writer and an epoch-making reformer and a rebel. Rashid Jahan has a strong personality and an individual voice which is quite evident in her style of writing and the kind of life which has lived and promotes. As an interpreter of society, cultures, civilizations and politics, Rashid Jahan appears to be distinct and unique in the sense that she is a trailblazer. She has written about things which no one dared to write about prior to her. Ranging from literal description of the process of childbirth to description of a modern woman keeping conditions before getting married, she has written about all.

In Rashid Jahan, readers will find the description of communal-riots in form of mandir- masjid (*Hindustani*), amalgamation of communal harmony and feminism (*Padosi*), misnomers about empowered women (*Mardwa Aurat*), urgent need of birth control (*Pardeke Peeche*), need of economic empowerment of women (*Aurat*), men plagued by their possessive wives (*Gosha-e-Aafiyat*), exploitation of the poor post-independence, (*Kaante Wala*), insensitivity of Indian husbands (*Dilli ki Sair*), a battlefield of Jihad transforming itself into a request for understanding, tolerance and solidarity in sisterhood (*Meraek Safar*), prostitution and venereal disease (*Woh*), thought process that being a widow is far better than being a spinster (*Bezubaan*), childbirth in unhygienic and lethal circumstances and child

marriage (*Asif Jehan ki Bahu*) and so on. The purpose of Jahan is clear – to give non-manipulative, non-political and real lives of people a platform.

Jahan born in 1905, in Aligarh to progressive parents, has devoted her life to uplift the society, polity and spread awareness for female education and medical science in India. She right from her childhood has seen emancipation and freedom of thought:

Her parental home, Abdullah Lodge, was the hub of activity with debates and discussions in which forward looking and visionary elite like the Begum of Bhopal, Atia Faizi, Aabru Begum (the sister of Maulana Abul Kalam Azaad) and others regularly took part. Her family was in the forefront of the intellectual and educational reformist movements in the Muslim community at the turn of the twentieth century. (Attia Abid, i)

She has carved a unique niche for herself in the Progressive Literature of India which is imbedded in Socialism and Marxism. Apart from being a communist, leftist and Marxist, she has been a conscious and responsible gynecologist. She has been an all-rounder when it comes to dealing with issues of the society. She has written about poor, farmers, wives, prostitutes, mothers, nationalists, Marxists and progressives.

She used Literature as an instrument of change and reform in society. Her stories and plays are like whiplashes designed to wake up a society that was steeped in conservatism and false beliefs. Some of the issues she dealt with in a language that was uninhibited, stark and totally devoid of shibboleths seem radical even from today's vantage point. (Asadduddin, 181)

She belongs to the generation of the intellectuals who faced problems, which resulted because of the freedom struggle, caste-system, feudalism, mal-treatment of women, poor, untouchables and farmers. As a struggler amidst these causes, Jahan's career has been limited because of her untimely death in 1952 because of cancer. She has not produced a huge corpus of writing but whatever she has written, has created ripples. Her contribution in *Angaarey* has made history and gave her the title, '*Rashid Jahan, Angaareywali*'. Her other works include *Aurat* and *Deegar Afsaanewa Drame* (Woman and other Stories and Plays, 1937), *Shola-e-Jwala* (Raging Flames, 1974) and a posthumous publication *Voh aur Dusre Afsaanewa Drame* (That one and other stories and plays, 1988). She has been the editor of a Political Journal entitled *Chingari* and wrote several stories and Radio plays for All India Radio. She dramatized Premchand's short story *Kafan* ('Shroud'), which, initially produced by the Students' Federation Lucknow, and later in Radio version for All-India Radio, Lucknow.

Rashid Jahan's literary career appears to be the discovery of her own society and struggle to uplift it in every dimension. Her fiction is full of realism. Her work is the result of her own multi-layered experiences– the deprivation, the painful wretchedness of the marginalized, the condition of women which she gets to see as gynecologist. She is a writer whose personal outlook and experience merge distinctly with everything she writes. She has been sensitive to her surroundings and learnt by all her senses: ears, eyes, touch and feel. Thus, expresses her heart out through her characters. That is why there is utmost clarity and directness in her language. "...she was very successful as a doctor" "two reasons... one was

her very acute sense of observation and judgement, as well as cool nerves in any situation. The other was this great quality of letting people feel she was one of them, so that they came to her not only as a doctor but also a friend..." (Saiduzzafar163)

Through her writings, she has provoked critical as well as radical reaction of the conservationists, patriarchal figures and custodians of society, religion and culture. Most of her writings emerge from a desire to understand her own society, its flaws and leaving no stone unturned in changing it by sensitizing people about the ills of the society.

She has never seen any discrimination being practiced at her own home but she felt extremely stuck and regressive when she has seen the world outside her house. A deep sense of chaos plays an important role in shaping her sensibilities and determining her writing career. The disparity between her house and society, left her with the urge to do something for the downtrodden and the subjugated.

And she didn't care about fees – she never asked for fees from these poorer people – they could pay her in cash and kind if they chose to – because she felt that the important thing was for them to get the treatment; and if necessary, she would give them the medicines herself. On the other hand, she didn't like going to see many patients of richer homes, although in these places she always asked for the fees. She felt that it was a bit of waste of her time and skill. (Saiduzzafar, 164)

The contradictions form the pivot of her of her works. As a woman born in an emancipated and educated family, in a sense she belongs to minority. She has desired to change this minority of empowered women into majority. She is radical in her writings as she knows how necessary a stimulus is for a change. A rebel with vehemently unconventional perspectives and vision, "...away from sentimental language, romantic situations and upper-class characters, towards addressing problems of social inequity and life among the oppressed, including laborers and women." (Minault97)

As a writer she never has to look for narratives, she always used to get them in her surroundings, her patients, her house-helps etc. These inspirations from the real world presented her with different artistic interest, interest in the behavioral pattern which can easily suggest the core, sometimes of the individuals she has come into contact with and generally of the whole nation or community concerned. The contact with the reality has taught her only how far he has grown away from the society. It has been a disturbing experience for her and it confirms her rootlessness as she has no clue by then. Each encounter with reality has saddened her and has emphasized further her own separateness from the society.

She had learned to detach herself from material things - - property, money, anything associated with personal gain... she could happily give away any or all of her possessions without the slightest sense of loss. Thus, while others were talking about communism in theory, she was practicing the precept "from each according to his ability; to each according to his needs." Her house was a living example of a commune where everything belonged to everybody, and where there were no barriers of class, religion or caste. (Saiduzzafar 162)

She has struggled hard to associate herself with the flaws of the society, she has analyzed each and wanted to remove them from the progressive world of her vision. Since her first story '*Salma*' it seems to be as if she is thoroughly interested in social-realism. She develops a research attitude towards socio-realism. She simply accepts through her works that showing mirror to the society and uplifting women and the downtrodden, are her major goals behind expressing herself.

Her writings have given rise to critical furor. Her wandering spirit can only find moorings and a sense of satisfaction is seeing the society being cleansed off the evils. The struggle has begun for her since the time she could not embrace the happenings in the society in the name of culture and religion. She has detached herself from religion, culture, belief-systems as the thought that they are not democratic. Her works are nothing but an exploration of the society in which she was living.

The involvement with society which she has, has manifested itself in violent rejection and turning away. Her rejection of the society can be seen in approximately everything related to her – the themes of her work, her contribution to associations like IPTA, AIPWA and CPI, her personal life, her dressing style – indicated towards her militantly individualistic self. Her disillusionment with the society and its illogical perceptivity has been depicted in almost all of her works.

Her works can be treated as chronicles of her times. In her works she has responded to the caste system, the irrational cultural and religious beliefs and hollow polity of her times. A woman of strong opinions, her heart has flinched yet she has described the unpleasant reality, acceptance of poverty, caste-system, squalor, confusion and irrationality.

She has transformed her anger into lucid, detailed observations. Rashid Jahan is most effective when she is sarcastic in her writings, which she is most of the times. She has pointed out the shortcomings of the Indian society. Her works have been considered as the original responses to society and its hypocrisy. For her India is not a land of rich spiritual heritage of the long-lasting ancient civilization but a country which needs lot of reforms and progressive and educated individuals who can be the torch-bearers of change. Religion has wrongly ingrained into the Indian society and she thinks that these ideas and traditions are decaying it. She sees the attitude of accepting traditions blindly and never questioning one's own belief-system. The Indian people have pride of belonging to the oldest lasting tradition but have a very strong reluctance to grow, to change and be accountable for their actions.

Her criticism extends into every aspect of society, culture, tradition and politics. No negative attitude escapes her perspective and critique including the subtle Indian habit of avoiding the painful reality of existence and slipping into the land of imagination. She not only identifies the problems into the society but also figures out the root causes. Her works serve as catalyst in the process of change that we all desire as Indians.

Her mind has always been made up and her works are just the endeavors to prove her stand. She depicted India as a traumatized society because of the orthodoxies in the name of culture, tradition, religion and heritage. She has captured the chaos, the agony, the helplessness of the Indian society which is barely visible to its own people. She shows a

distorted picture of a society in her works. She indicates, through her works, an urge to have scientific inclination and humility which will encourage learning and creativity. She speaks of hypocrisy and arrogance which is rampant India along with a lack of civic sense and concern for society or collective development. Her works are like eye-openers to the underlying psychology that has driven India for most of the past millennium. She captures its many facets without being stereotypical and provides a truly damning account of society with its stark nakedness.

She urges Indian society to develop ways and ideologies to deal with the challenges of the modern world. Her observations about the society are astute and nuanced. She rips through the psyche of the society in uncompromising and practical way. She sees the society in chaos, a turmoil.

Her works offer complex and diverse struggles which emerge for equality, survival, power and wealth. She is a great observer of humanity.

Rashid Jahan had made a pioneering inroad into the literary public sphere by claiming for herself – and for other women – the authority to speak, not only about women’s bodies and sex, but about maternity, science, progress, ethics and epistemology. (Gopal 32)

She is a rare talent with capacity to narrate with stimulating insights about the culture which nourishes the identity of Indian people. Philip Smith writes, “Theorists believe that culture provides stability, solidarity and opportunity in sustaining conflicts, powers and equality” (3). But in Jahan’s works it is evident that culture is playing a regressive role and is not letting people be aware of their shortcomings.

She covers the traumatic period of India’s political independence accompanied by the religious fault lines. She is considered as a powerful voice in support of freedom, human brotherhood, dignity and egalitarianism. She has been an excellently vocal, public intellectual participating actively in the progressive struggles of her times. A socialist activist, for her political participation in those struggles has been seamless with writing plays and short stories portraying stark reality.

In reality it is not wrong to call her a humanist who has been guided by a holistic vision. For her culture, society and politics are inseparable. Just writing about things has never been her take, on the contrary she believes in walking the talk herself. I would like to conclude with following lines: “Rashid Jahan thus covers the spectrum of her experiences and her socio-political beliefs in her writing. She intended her short-stories to be educational and followed the progressive line in her choice of subject matter... Rashid Jahan knew that her education, background, connections, and energy made her a most influential person in her class, and she determined to take fully advantage of that for the betterment of society. The complete immersion in radical politics, medicine, and literature side by side is clear evidence of the goals that she set for herself. Had her health not been so precarious for numerous of years, it is very likely that she would have had an even more significant influence in all her areas of interest. (Poulos 116)

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