



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 07, July 2026)

Representation of Gender Discrimination and Health Problems in Rasheed Jahan's Stories and Plays

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Abstract-- The motive for pursuing this research venture is to discuss the short stories and plays of Rasheed Jahan. Rasheed Jahan was an Urdu feminist writer in the pre- and post-partition time of the Indian subcontinent. Rasheed Jahan, in her writings, has boldly discussed Gender discrimination and Health problems in the Asian Muslim society. Her aim in writing such stories is to instigate people to contemplate and reflect on the times they were living in.

One major theme that her writings depict is Gender discrimination and health problems in society. This shows how women were constantly objectified and labelled as mere properties. Her writings show how the veil or 'Purdah', which inflicts patriarchal and religious anxieties about femininity, is often perceived as an icon of female oppression.

Rasheed Jahan, as a woman, as a doctor writing about gender, medicine, and the politics of space between an icon of the literary radicalism of 'Angarey' itself, decried by some others. Rasheed Jahan's play 'Aurat' lays bare many cruelties imposed on women in the name of religion and society. The story 'Mard Aur Aurat' is set against the patriarchal norms, the cultural expectations placed on women regarding marriage and obedience in India. Jahan gives voice to the suppressed desires of women; she challenges the dominance of men in both public and private spheres. Through this work, she advocates the importance of education and employment for women; this work demands not just sympathy but a rethinking of the biased gender roles.

Rasheed Jahan's one-act play 'Pardey Ke Peechey' (Behind the Veil) is a bitter rant by a married woman who lives her life in seclusion. It is an account of a victim's experience of oppressive domesticity.

Keywords-- Gender Discrimination, Health Problems, Oppression, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

The status of women in India before and after independence reflects a long history of systematic marginalization, governed by patriarchal norms, cultural biases. Before Independence, women were largely confined to household chores; they were supposed to be very obedient, and they were totally dependent on their husbands. Social evils such as child marriage, the purdah system, and the oppressive treatment of widows were deeply entrenched in society, leaving women with little autonomy over their lives. While reform movements attempted to address these issues. Some powerful voices, like that of Rasheed Jahan, began to emerge in the early 20th century.

In her stories, such as Purdah, Aurat, and Hindustani, she exposed the social suffocation of women trapped within rigid family and religious structures. Legal reforms were made for the upliftment of women. Yet, the lived experiences of women, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, continued to be marked by violence, discrimination, and restricted mobility. Writers like Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai highlighted the reality in their fearless works of literature.

Rasheed Jahan is one of the most renowned women writers of Urdu literature who discussed the problems of women and their sufferings in her work. She was born on August 25, 1905, into a wealthy Muslim family, and the idea of promoting women's development was deeply rooted in her family background. She was so much inspired by her father, Sheikh Abdullah, a reform-minded educator. He was a well-known person of that time, and he worked for the upliftment of women. Rasheed Jahan was brought up in an atmosphere that automatically evoked a sense of helping vulnerable women from a very young age.

Rasheed Jahan was not only a pathbreaking writer but also a doctor and a communist. Jahan was trained as a gynecologist at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. In 1933, she joined the Communist Party of India, and she married her fellow writer Mahmud-Uz-Zafar in 1934. She and her husband were both the central figures in the formation of the "Progressive Writers Movement." Because of her works and the social issues that she raised, she was often called "Angareywali Rashid Jahan."

Angarey (Buring Coals) was the turning point in the life of Jahan as a female Urdu writer. The work is published in Lucknow by Nizami Press. There were four major writers, of whom Rasheed Jahan was the only female member; all the other members were Sajjad Zaheer, who was also the editor, Mahmud-Uz-Zafar, and Ahmed Ali. This work is a collection of essays and short stories which reflects the class inequality, the female subjugation, the mistreatment of women, how they are sexually, mentally, and emotionally harassed in the name of Muslim rituals and challenges the religious orthodoxy, Jahan's work especially "Dilli ki Sair" and "Pardey Ke Peechey" criticized the male dominating society where women were considered as mere object.



Angarey had been called Blasphemous by the leaders and spiritual preachers; the result of its publishing was violent. The writers, especially Rasheed Jahan, faced a lot of trouble. Death threats and fatwas were issued for the writers. Rasheed Jahan had been threatened with acid attacks. Because of these ill human activities, the British Colonial Government decided to ban the book in 1933. Just after a few days of its publishing, the copies of the book were destroyed; only five copies are known to survive.

Rasheed Jahan was labeled with the tag of 'Angareywali' (the woman of embers); her critics tried to demean her by this title, but later it became a justification of her courage and a badge of honor that showed her rebellious personality. Although Angarey was banned but it worked as fuel for the formation of a larger movement called "Progressive Writers Movement." In 1936, Rasheed Jahan and Sajjad Zaheer launched this movement, in which writers like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Ismat Chughtai, and Saadat Hasan Manto were included. The main objective behind this movement was to uncover the social problems and to rebel against the British Colonial Government.

II. THE INNER LIVES OF WOMEN HIDDEN BY TRADITION: BEHIND THE VEIL:

The Pre-Independent India witnessed strong male dominance, and the subjugation of women was at its peak. Women of all religions went through immense hardships. Rasheed Jahan was not only a writer but also a doctor, so she was well aware of the health issues caused by back-to-back pregnancies, and she boldly wrote about the side effects of getting pregnant continuously. Through the one-act play "Pardey Ke Peechey," she highlighted the vulnerability of a muslim woman, and she criticized the oppressive culture of Purdah. She also mocked a society in which women were treated as objects, a society in which they were only expected to deliver children and to look after their family, and their bodies were considered as tools for the entertainment of their husbands.

This work attempts to find out the root cause of women's oppression in the institution of marriage. It reflects the cruel reality of the marriage institution, where women were not allowed to do something of their choice, their husbands did not even bother to understand how their wives were feeling, and women were not only suppressed physically, but they had to face mental torture. Jahan portrayed the condition of all the muslim women before the pre-independence era. She also criticized the custom of early marriage.

Pardey Ke Piche (Behind the Veils) begins with the conversation between two muslim women, Muhammadi Begum and her sister-in-law.

Muhammadi Begum openly expressed their thoughts and experiences about their bodies, how repeated childbirth affected their health, and they also talked about sexual plight. Muhammadi Begum was just a 32-year-old woman, but because of repeated pregnancy and the sexual harassment done by her husband, she looked like an old woman, and she even lost her teeth. It was all because of her husband, who is concerned with fulfilling his lust.

Motherhood, which is often considered a very pious and beautiful phase in the life of a woman, is a time when women need emotional support, but when Muhammadi Begum experienced this in her life then she was not even allowed to feed her newborn because her husband believed that he would not get time for the sake of his personal entertainment. By writing this incident, Rasheed Jahan exposed how husbands want their wives to obey their commands. Being a mother, she wants to give proper care and love to her child, but the way she was stopped from feeding her own child reflects how her own body is no longer her own; it's controlled by her husband, and she was helpless.

Muhammadi Begum had to go through various surgeries because of the never-ending lust of her husband. In the story, during the conversation with her sister-in-law, Aftab Begum, she shares the emotional vulnerability that she had to face every day and talks about the health problems she reveals:

"Twice I had operations. My uterus, as well as all my lower parts, had begun to slide down. It needed to be corrected so that my Mian could get the pleasure of a new wife from my body." She put it right again and had to bear all that pain, not to get cured but because her husband could feel the same pleasure as he got when they were newly married.

But her husband was not satisfied with this; he pressured her to arrange his marriage with her Mamu's daughter, Razia, and when she opposed doing it, he mobbed her by saying, "It is your duty to help me." He starts to read out the Aayats from the Quran Sharif and tries to evoke fear in her by explaining about the kind of hell she will face after death if she denies her husband.

Rasheed Jahan portrays the kind of pain a woman holds in her heart, even if she sacrifices everything that she gets in return, which was so disheartening. Instead of getting care and support, they have to face unfaithfulness, and they are also threatened by polygamy. Jahan, being a doctor, had tried to portray the dangerous health issues a woman had to face because of sexual exploitation. Behind the veil is a satire on the society that indulged in all kinds of immoral activities in the name of religion and hypocritical beliefs.



III. A WOMAN'S STAND AGAINST INJUSTICE IN THE PLAY AURAT:

The play Aurat (Woman) by Jahan was also a dialogue between husband and wife. It is an example of Jahan's bold writing; this work challenges the deeply rooted patriarchy and religious hypocrisy of the society. The play begins with the conversation between a muslim couple, Fatima, and her husband, Atiqullah (Maulavi). The play revolves around the dispute between the couple; her husband wants to marry again because she was a childless woman, but it doesn't mean that she was barren, she had 12 children's but none of them were alive. Her husband was not happy with her, and she always blamed herself or God for the death of her children. She was treated in a very disrespectful manner by her husband and by society because she was childless, and she bore all those sufferings silently. She was portrayed by Jahan as a woman who questions; she also questioned Allah,

"Am I to blame that my children died?"

Fatima was a brave woman; she opposed this decision of her husband and argued with him. Her husband tries to justify his idea of a second marriage by quoting religious texts that favor the belief that a man should marry again if he wants a child. Her husband says that your position in the house is lower than that of a dog in the house. In between the argument, he slapped Fatima.

Her husband decided to locate his second wife on the first floor, Fatima's aunty was sad for her, she reminded her that your father had gifted you this house, you are the owner of this house, she was helped by her cousin Kadeer he promised to help her and make her aware of the legal rights of women on property, he also told her that she was not reason behind the death of her children it was because of the Maulavi, after all of these things she rebelled against her husband. She puts a stop to his order, and she claims ownership of the house by calling her husband a "beggar."

The society considers women subjugation normal because they believe women have no other option but to be patient and in the muslim society women are supposed to live in purdah and it also promotes suppression of women, the authoritative mentality of people supports polygamy and the religious texts were used by men to prove their points, all in all religious texts are just a tool to suppress women. This muslim patriarchal value is clearly visible in the play when Fatima's Mamani said,

"What can a woman do? She will weep and cry, that's all."

This statement reflects the acceptance of abuse within the cultural framework. It also represents that women are socially conditioned to believe their only response to suffering is weeping, not action.

It shows how women have come to accept their powerlessness in a male-dominated society. Society expects women to suffer silently; they are not allowed to rebel, but Jahan, through the character of Fatima, breaks this stereotypical thinking.

Through this play, Jahan exposed the radical and the poor mentality of society about those women who did not conceive, and she criticizes the second marriage; she critiques how this practice of second marriage was used by men to show their authority over women, how they use it as a tool to exploit women under the shield of tradition and religion. She criticizes not only individual men but also the entire social system that enables such behaviour. She reveals how men mold things to serve their own interests, while women are told to remain patient and obedient. In this play, she portrayed a woman who fought for her rights, and through this play, she wants to bring awareness and change in society.

IV. ADVOCATING WOMEN'S RIGHT TO LEARN AND EARN IN MARD AUR AURAT:

Rasheed Jahan's other work, Mard Aur Aurat (Man and Woman), also opens with a dialogue between couples. This story is about a woman who wants to be independent in life, and for her, the very first step towards complete freedom is to earn for herself. Rasheed Jahan had not given a name to the characters because the issue that she raised in this story is common in all communities. Through the characters of this story, she had tried to deliver the message among the young women of India that to be educated and to be employed should have to be the major aim of each and every girl. Through this story, Rasheed Jahan urges women to understand that economic independence is the only way to stop the exploitation and to achieve true freedom, equality, and dignity.

The major conflict is that the woman wants to live independently, she wants to be known in the society by her own capability, based on the position which she holds at her work place not based on her family background or by her husband's wealth and social status, but the male protagonist believes that a woman should not rebel for these stupid ideas, for him women should live in the house, he does not want her wife to work and earn.

Rasheed Jahan reflects on how men want to put their authority over a woman. Whenever the female protagonist asked for a valid reason as to why she should only take care of the house and not work outside, the male protagonist never had a real answer. He always says, "Because this is how it has always been. Earning money is my job, and managing the house is yours."



To prove his point, he even tried to demean the female protagonist by saying, “What difference does it make if a woman earns?” Through these statements:

“Jahan clearly reveals how the contribution of women is often undervalued by society.”

In between the conversation of the couple Jahan reveals the importance of financial independence in woman’s life, to counter the continuous denial to work outside from the male protagonist she says that, “Whatever it may be, this is the key to my freedom”, and when the male protagonist ironical said that, “So, your freedom lies in these mere hundred rupees?” then, she broke her silence by saying, “Whether It’s hundred or two hundred that’s not the point. The essence of freedom lies in standing on your own feet.”

By all these statements and this story, Rasheed Jahan challenges the idea that women must depend on men financially, and the society that supports the idea of women being confined within the four walls. She challenges the biased gender roles that aim to suppress women. She also raised a point that to be educated is important, but it does not bring any change in her condition if she woman does not earn. Jahan believes that financial independence and education are both essential for the growth of women. Education helps them to understand their rights, but without financial independence, they cannot resist their exploitation.

This story of Jahan is relevant even in the 21st century because it advocates issues which is prevalent in today’s world, where gender equality is still a struggle. There is a misconception in society towards working women; people have a false prejudice about them, and they believe that if a woman is working, then she cannot properly handle her house and family. Through the dialogues of her female protagonist, Rasheed Jahan outrightly rejects the traditional gender roles and introduces a new progressive view that it is the equal duty of both man and woman to look after the house and family.

V. CONCLUSION

Through all her works, Rasheed Jahan had tried to reshape the socio-cultural landscape of Indian society. Being a gynecologist and from a muslim background, she was aware

of the problems that a woman faces, and she boldly writes about those things and criticizes the evil social customs, religion, and religious beliefs that promote the suppression of women. She criticized the gender discrimination and demanded equality for women in all spheres. As a prominent Urdu writer, her legacy lies in her fearless defiance of patriarchal norms. She has expanded the Urdu literature by addressing the problems of women, and because of the issues that she addressed, Jahan remains relevant even in today’s world.

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