

A Spark That Lit the Fire

Written by [Amrita Dutta](#) | May 18, 2014 12:49 am

A biography brings to life the forgotten Progressive Urdu writer, Rashid Jahan, whose stories opened the doors to the zenana



Rashid Jahan

Writer Urdu

Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi where she trained as a gynecologist

Born 25.08.1905

Passed away 1952

From a sprawling house in Rasalganj in Aligarh, every morning, a covered palanquin carrying the girls of the Abdullah family would set off for a house in the old city. Its destination: the first school for Muslim girls in north India that had been set up a few years ago. Sometimes, the palanquin would be replaced by a cart, a big white sheet wrapped around it to maintain purdah. Inside would be the giggling children of the school's founders and reformists, Shaikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan. The lurching "school bus" provided much mirth, and excitement — once it got stuck on the railway tracks, as the sheet got caught in the wheels. Out jumped the eldest daughter Rashid Jahan, with blithe disregard for the restrictions of being seen in public. She tugged and pushed the cart out, a few minutes before the train would roar past. Her aunt would later admonish her: "Were you not ashamed?... There were so many men staring."

The women on that journey were pioneers of their age, braving stares as well as opprobrium of the society. From 1906, the school set up by (*Rashid's fathers*) Abdullah, despite great opposition, to educate girls from sharif Muslim homes, would be a bridge to a better, empowered life for many young women. It would grow to become a hostel, and then the Aligarh Women's College. And Rashid Jahan would break many more rules, on her way to becoming a doctor, a Communist and a pathbreaking writer. Her stark, angry stories about the lives and deprivations of women in purdah, would be a part of the reconfiguring of Urdu literature that the Progressive Writers' Movement initiated.

She was the literary forerunner of writers like Ismat Chughtai, who was her junior at the Aligarh school. For Chughtai, Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) was a freethinker and rebel she modelled herself on. "She spoiled me because she was very bold and would speak all sorts of things openly and loudly, and I just wanted to copy her," Chughtai wrote in her autobiography. Of her writing, Chughtai would say: "The handsome heroes and pretty heroines of my stories, the candle-like fingers, the lime blossoms and crimson blossoms all vanished... the earthy Rashid Jahan shattered all my ivory idols to pieces... Life, stark and naked, stood before me."

To literary historians, however, Rashid Jahan has remained a footnote, remembered as the only woman member of the literary quartet — the others were Ahmed Ali, who would go on to write the classic *Twilight in Delhi*, Sajjad Zaheer and Mahmuduzzafar — who, in December 1932, produced *Angaarey*, a collection of stories and plays that inflamed the Urdu-speaking elite Muslim society by its sharp criticism of its social and sexual mores. Three months after its publication, the deafening outcry against it led the British government to ban it. Fatwas were issued against the four authors, and, as a woman, Rashid Jahan was targetted most fiercely, threatened with an acid attack. *Angaarey* was the first salvo in the challenge of the socially-conscious Progressive Writers' Movement to the elitist assumptions of Urdu literature.

A new biography by Urdu critic *Rakhshanda Jalil, A Rebel and Her Cause* (Women Unlimited), which also includes English translations of her stories and plays, attempts to reinstate Rashid Jahan as more than the *Angaareywali*. Jalil grew up in an Urdu-speaking home, where Rashid Jahan was a legend long after her death, held up as "a liberal, and secular icon," as a "bold, provocative woman", who died too young. "My sense was that a lot of people talked of her with awe and admiration, but had not read her, or having read her, not treated her as a serious writer," she says.

In Jalil's telling, Rashid Jahan's journey in pre-Independence India, from a liberal education at her father's school to discarding the *purdah* as a student of Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, and then on to **Lady Hardinge Medical College** in Delhi, where she trained as one of the first Muslim women doctors, was an exceptional one — "a first flight into the great unknown". From Delhi, she joined the Provincial Medical Services, and was posted to small towns across north India, from Bahraich to Bulandshahar and Meerut. A Muslim gynaecologist in a *khaddar sari* and a sleeveless blouse, her hair cropped short, travelling to the hinterland on her own on work, far from her comfort zone. "All of this is very unusual in early 20th century," Jalil says.

As a doctor at government hospitals, she treated the very poor, and her stories were forged out of that experience. Perhaps, that also explains the clinical precision she brought to descriptions of women's bodies, and the frankness with which she spoke about the female form's continual battering by the demands of men and childbirth. "Before Rashid Jahan, no one thought that women's lives, especially the lives of women in *purdah* were fit subjects for literature.

This in itself is a radical departure. She wrote in a *begmati zabaan*, what women of upper-class Muslim families speak to each other. A very idiomatic, flavoursome language, with lots of *mohawras*, long sentences interspersed with shorter ones. Syntactically, too, it was different from the language of high literature," says Jalil.

In *Pardey Ke Peechhe*, the play she wrote for *Angaarey*, a woman weary of multiple pregnancies, and feeble of health, speaks to another woman of her husband's insatiable sexual appetite, "The truth is that my womb and all the lower parts had slipped so far down that I had to get them fixed, so that my husband would get the same pleasure he might from a new wife." In *Asif Jahan ki Bahu*, a short story, she plunges the reader in the cacophony of the *zenana*, as

a woman delivers a child amid a gaggle of relatives, and with the help of a midwife equipped with little more than bare hands and a rusted knife.

It was, as if, Rashid Jahan was drawing the reader into the forbidden women's quarter, and letting her see the brittle lives trapped there. When her stories crossed the threshold of sharif homes, the effect would be equally powerful. *Woh* is a stinging little story about an encounter between the narrator, an educated woman teacher and a prostitute, her face disfigured with syphilis, which begins with an innocuous smile at a dispensary. Touched by the narrator's smile, the diseased prostitute begins to visit the teacher at her school, with a *motiya*, a gift of a flower. The revulsion that she evokes at the school ends in horrific violence. "When I think of the kind of stories she writes, I break out in gooseflesh. A sharif woman — and the idea of *sharafat* was very ingrained in Upper India — she was breaking every rule, and breaking it with natural ease," says Jalil.

With parents who made it their life's mission to educate women, and whose home was open to many intellectuals and political leaders, Rashid Jahan grew up with a finely-honed political consciousness. Through her life, too, "she was engaged in all the major debates of the time," says Jalil. In 1934, she married Mahmuduzzafar, fellow Communist and writer. Till her death in 1953, in Moscow of cancer, their house was a commune, open to poets and intellectuals, where Faiz Ahmed Faiz, among many others, found hospitality and his Communist moorings, and was inspired by Rashid Jahan. She is remembered as a woman of great charisma, who treated everyone as an equal, as the Communist doctor who gave away all her earnings to the party. Her writings reflect not just a feminist sensibility, but an empathy for the poor and the deprived, as can be seen in stories like *Chor*.

In her sister Khurshid Mirza's memoirs, *A Woman of Substance*, she is Rashida apa, who would arrive from Lucknow like a whirlwind, and get her sisters to knit woollens for her impoverished patients. The nationalist who would teach her sister to say: "I'm a non-cooperative", and dissuade her from wearing Western clothes. The images sourced by Jalil are of a beautiful, assured woman, her every glance revealing a free spirit.

"At her wedding in Dehradun, she wore white and she broke into a dance," says Jalil.

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