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Suffering to Subtle Defiance: Fatima's Journey in Rashid Jahan's Play "Aurat"

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Abstract: The drama *Aurat*, was first published in 1937 in its native Urdu language. Tutun Mukherjee and A.Z. Manzar translated *Aurat* into English as *Woman* and published it in the book "*Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*" in 2005. The drama provides a profound understanding of the circumstances prevailing in the Muslim community. It is a significant piece of literature that explores the complex dynamics of gender oppression and the gradual awakening of female consciousness. It holds a significant place in Rasheed Jahan's oeuvre because it not only talks about a women's pitiable condition but it goes a step further and shows her taking a stand which was quite unusual for that era. Through a close analysis of key moments and textual lines, this article examines center character Fatima's journey and transformation and its implications for gender discourse.

Keywords: Rashid Jahan, 'Woman', Muslim community, Patriarchy, female consciousness.

Introduction

Rasheed Jahan (1905-1952) was a professional doctor, committed social reformer, activist, and prolific writer. Jahan was a prominent Communist in India and has been referred to be one of the first feminists in history. She wrote short stories and plays. As a playwright she made exceptional contribution to the development of Urdu play. She addressed women's concerns with more candor and boldly confronted the patriarchal system. She actively engaged in several initiatives aimed at enhancing women's rights and self-determination. She authored one-act dramas centered on the lives of middle-class women in home settings. The characters in her work are not passive; instead, they possess tremendous determination, engages in debates, and challenge societal norms that impact their lives. Ismat Chughtai, one of the important Muslim women writers, describes her experience of reading Jahan in 1986 interview:

The handsome heroes and pretty heroines of my stories, candlelike fingers, the lime blossoms and the crimson outfits all vanished into thin air. The earthly Rasheed Jahan simply shattered all my ivory idols to piece...Life, Stark, naked, stood before me. (Mukherjee 515).

One of the few critics to seriously engage with Rashid Jahan's work during her lifetime was Shaista Ikramullah. In her seminal work, *A Critical Study of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story (1945)*, she offers insights on Rashid Jahan's 'Woman'.

It is a common enough occurrence, namely a husband contemplating a second marriage on the ground that his wife is childless. The fiction writers of the last four decades have condemned and criticized this cupidity of man. But none of them had the smoldering indignation that is present in Rashid's indictment of it, nor has anyone yet succeeded in showing how contemptible were such men as she has. So far authors have been content to show just this one trait in man's character, but Rashid has shown the entire man in his grossness.

The play opens with the conversation between a couple Fatima and Atiqullah the Maulvi over second marriage of Atiqullah. Atiqullah plans to get into second marriage as Fatima couldn't give him children. In fact Fatima is not barren, she has given birth to twelve children, unfortunately they are either still born or short lived. As the conversation progresses, Fatima feels so sad, gets irritated and enters into argument with her husband. Atiqullah hurts her more with his insensible comments. He tries to justify his actions by quoting religious texts which pronounces the childlessness as a valid reason to get into second marriage. In the peak of argument, when Fatima continues questioning Atiqullah, he slaps Fatima to silence her. This incident ignites her to think. This thinking process is furthered by the conversations she had with the tenant, the maid, her aunt and her cousins especially Khadeer helps her to take a decision to come out as self-reliant women.

Rashid Jahan's character Fatima is central to this narrative, symbolizing the journey from submission to a state of subtle defiance. This transformation is not abrupt but occurs through subtle shift in her awareness and attitude, influenced by her interactions with different people and the harsh realities of her life. The character development of Fatima in a drama, starts off as a woman who is subjected to oppression and exploitation within the religious and patriarchal systems. However, she undergoes a transformation and becomes aware of her own power and challenges her husband's desires, asserts her rights over her husband and her property. She even considers taking legal action to prevent her husband from taking a second wife.

At the beginning of the play, Fatima is portrayed as a typical housewife, constrained by societal expectations and dominated by her husband's authority. It is a society permeated by Muslim patriarchal values which promotes, purdah, unquestioning obedience to husband, polygamy and misinterpretation of religious texts for the advantage of men. The community expects wives to be patient and accept her fate, essentially reinforcing the societal norm that women should silently tolerate mistreatment Fatima's aunty and Khadeer's mother Mamani reflects the mindset of women when she says if the husband doesn't listen "What can a woman do? She will weep and cry, that's all." Even the other women like the tenant and the maid are also of the view that women should endure taking it as their fate. This expectation of wives to endure abuse is poignantly illustrated by her cousin Khadeer when he says, how other women in the community perpetuate "...and advises her to be patient and suffer her fate."(532) Fatima exists in a state of silent suffering in this oppressive environment she inhabits.

This perspective underscores the deeply ingrained acceptance of abuse within the cultural framework and highlights the challenges Fatima faces in seeking change or asserting herself.

Though from the beginning she is shown as a person who questions, she performs her responsibilities as a dutiful wife. She meticulously tends to her husband's needs and well-being, showing genuine concern for his health. When he tries to take more than enough sweets she warns him, " Look here, you've not been well and now you're eating these rich sweets... won't you fall ill?"(524) Despite her own hardships, Fatima fulfills her role with a sense of obligation and care, embodying the traditional expectations placed upon women in her society. Her initial portrayal highlights the stark contrast between her submissive existence and the potential for her eventual transformation.

Prior to knowing the reason for the death of her children, these societal norms tailored her in such a way to put blame either on herself or look unto God questioning him but never to put blame her husband. She silently bears the stigma of childless women in the society and the taunting of her husband. In the fit of agony, she questions Allah

" Am I to blame that my children died?"(518)

"... Why have you made us women so helpless?"(527)

Fatima considers childlessness as her fate

"... It is my fate. The children's death is laid at my door too, as the result of my sins" (533).

These lines encapsulate her initial state, as a caring housewife, reflecting how deeply ingrained societal norms dictate her life and suffering in silence.

Atiqullah represents patriarchy in Muslim community. He believes in strict adherence to purdah, man's supremacy over woman, absolute obedience, silence and dependency on the part of woman, uncompromising attitude towards traditional dress and hypocritical use of religious texts. Atiqullah insists that Fatima observe purdah when meeting her cousins, Kadeer and Aziz, highlighting his adherence to traditional values. However, Fatima questions this expectation, indicating her more progressive stance on the matter:

ATIQU: "You must observe purdah with them."

FATIMA: "Why must I observe purdah with them?" (520).

This exchange not only underscores the differing perspectives of Atiqullah and Fatima but also sets the stage for Fatima's broader journey of questioning and resisting societal norms. Fatima's questioning and defiance serve as central themes in her character's transformation.

Fatima's daily life is marked by numerous instances of verbal, emotional and physical abuse from her husband, these interactions starkly underscore the imbalanced power dynamics and her profound lack of autonomy for women. Time and again her husband reminds her of the death of children, her barrenness and his planning to marry again making Fatima vulnerable and emotional. When Fatima argues, Atiqullah doesn't hesitate to answer her in a rude way. He manipulates religious texts to justify his wrongdoings, showing a blatant disregard for the emotional pain he inflicts on Fatima. He gets angry whenever Fatima argues and question him

"You argue about everything and want to go against my wishes all the time" (523).

"What a strange woman! She calls her husband a liar! No wonder your children die." (518). He believes that it is the fate of women to live with *soutens*(co-wives).

Atiqullah tries to show Fatima the place she has in family life when there is an argument between husband and wife. "And what are you? What do you think of yourself?... You had better be warned that you are creating hell for yourself by making me angry." (525) and "...your status will be lower than that of a dog in this house." (525) All that verbal and emotional abuse culminates into physical abuse as the argument regarding second marriage goes to the peak. Atiqullah slaps Fatima very hard saying

" You stupid, uncultured devilish women, when you can't understand words, then you'll understand this...(slaps Fatima very hard and turns to go.)" (526)

Atiqullah is much respected by the people around as he is a maulvi who is well versed in the religious scriptures and even gives amulets for curing diseases. But the play reveals the other side of maulvi who uses religious texts for his own advantage, lies, never uses amulets to cure his and his wife's problems and hides his own disease from the eyes of the society and Fatima. Only Fatima knows this side of maulvi, hates him and questions his hypocrisy and injustice. Her questioning turns into threats when she hears the decision of her husband to get married again. "Then listen to me. I shall turn all your hypocrisy of being a maulvi, your big show and prestige, into ashes."(525). This is the stage of Fathima's journey which travels from acceptance to questioning and then to threatening and finally to self assertion.

The conversations she had with the tenant and maid made her realize the helplessness and injustice the women face in Muslim patriarchal society. Fathima's tenant exclaiming for blaming women alone for the death of her children and expressing her impatience over Maulvi not treating his wife's illness; the maid's exclamation over the physical violence exerted by maulvi "Such a big maulvi and raises his hand on the woman"(527); the maid weeping over the state of Fatima- all these made Fatima experience sisterhood and to see the status a woman has in Muslim patriarchal society. These moments of private anguish signify the beginning of her inner transformation, as she starts to see the broader context of her suffering.

Fatima's aunty Mamani is also instrumental in bringing awareness about property rights in Fatima. Fatima feels helpless and doesn't know what to do when she comes to know that her husband is trying locate his second wife in the upper portion of their house without consulting Fatima, it is Mamani feeling sad over Maulvi beating Fatima, reminds Fatima of her ownership of the house. "This is your house, gifted to you by your father. What right has he to bring his second wife into this house?"(528).

She is further motivated by her cousin Kadeer, a law student who encourages and creates legal awareness about property rights. When Fatima says that there are no guardians or sons to support and stand by her. Kadeer makes her think by posing a question which questions the age-old belief of woman's dependency in patriarchal society.

"...Are you a child that you need their support? Don't you realize that we must become our own guardians and learn to support ourselves?"(531).

Despite her lack of guardian or son, despite being discouraged by women bound by patriarchal mind set, Fatima is prepared to confront her husband alone, even if she feels powerless. She is sensitized to the fact that she owns property and can prevent Atiq from bringing a co-wife to live in her house. Fatima has resolved to seek legal recourse in order to prevent her husband from introducing a new wife into her house. Fatima asserts vehemently, "If he brings her here then I promise in the name of God that I shall do everything to stop him."(532).

Fatima through Khadeer comes to know the true reason for the death for her children is the sexually transmitted disease she contacted through Maulvi. Fatima becomes much bolder now and is ready to encounter her husband. These events and discussions she had with others create awareness which leads to acts of boldness to question the authority of her husband and assert herself in her house. Fatima's voice, once subdued, now carried a note of defiance, a glimmer of a spirit unbroken. When her husband questions for not keeping purdah with her cousins, she doesn't answer her husband as she used to, but walks away without answering. But when he asks about treatment and questions her how can she arrange treatment without his knowledge, she in fury confronts her husband, accusing him of transmitting the venereal disease to her. In fact Atiqullah is the murderer of her children. She exercises autonomy in selecting the time and location for her treatment. She puts a stop to his "orders". She claims the ownership of her house calling her husband "beggar".

FATIMA: What illness will I have but the one that you have infected me with? You killed all my children. You are a murderer. A murderer and a cheat! I'll do exactly what I want and go for treatment whenever and wherever I want. Nobody can stop me now. I've had enough of your orders.

ATIQU: Shut your mouth. Don't start jumping on the strength on those two cousins of yours. Let them dare to enter my house again!

FATIMA: Your house? Beggar! Did your family ever own a house? (536)

By the ending of the play Fatima defies Atiqullah and approaches him menacingly, refusing to succumb to tears or helplessness, as Atiqullah raises his hand to slap Fatima again. She confronts him with hostile demeanor and warns him saying

"Be careful and sit down. If you want to keep your self- respect intact, then take care. I warn you, if you try to hit me again, be ready to face the consequences." (536).

She mocks him with sarcasm and contemptuously states, “He pretends to be a man...wants to marry a second time!”(536).

The playwright subtly shows the stepping back of Fatima’s husband signifying his defeat. “Atiq hesitates. He slowly lowers his raised hand. He takes a few steps back and sits heavily on the takht.” (536). It is Fatima who puts silence to the voices of patriarchy in the form of her husband and comes out as a self-reliant, self-assertive, independent and courageous woman. Her departure is an act of resistance and a physical demonstration of Fatima’s refusal to conform to patriarchal norms, communicated not through spoken language but through bodily actions. Here Fatima is shown as walking towards the inner door but in fact it is opening the outer door towards freedom from patriarchal subjugations.

Conclusion

Fatima exhibits resilience, strength, and a strong sense of self-worth. She defies societal norms and patriarchal expectations, advocating for gender equality and women’s property rights. The final image of Fatima portrays her as a figure of quiet strength and resilience, suggesting that the seeds of rebellion and transformation has been sown. Her rejection of domestic violence and her refusal to remain silent about it demonstrate her rebellion against the acceptance of abuse within marital relationships. Despite the grim realities, the play emphasizes the need for women to recognize their worth and fight for their rights. The journey of Fatima in the play undoubtedly is a journey from suffering to subtle defiance.

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