

## Social Dogmas Embedded in the Standpoint to Hamper Approbation of Feminism in the Human Being as Reflected in *Behind the Veil* by Rashid Jahan

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Feminism is the concept that lays the foundation of society. Understanding feminism in true sense is the precondition to sustain it and to sustain feminism is the most vital requisite to build a strong society. After understanding feminism, we can observe that it is violated at different levels. What blurs the understanding of feminism is the custom we follow, and the dogmas we accept incontrovertibly. When we don't analyze and evaluate dogmas and are completely immersed in those, they tend to lead us towards the harm of humanity; not always but most of the times. Feminism is attacked the most brutally by the dogmas which are built to support patriarchy or male dominance. This picture of society engrossed by the dogmas is reflected at many places in literature. *Behind the Veil*, originally written in Urdu with the title 'Parde ke Peeche', by Rashid Jahan is one of the best example of diminished feminism due to the mist of dogmas. It reveals how feminism is brutally tormented, as everybody seems to be completely engrossed by social dogmas. The present paper attempts a discussion on how feminism is hampered at different levels during this powerful One-Act play- *Behind the Veil*.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, dogmas, male dominance, humanity.

Ages have passed but the researches, struggles, manipulations and emerging notions regarding the concept of feminism have not come to the cease. Every new aspect around gives it a new turn and that is always to the acceptance of a big mass. But one thing is commonly seen in various research related to feminism that whenever new research on feministic theory is made, it's like coming out of a shell that is accepted, and most of the time appreciated from a certain point of view. Feminism, most of the times, is mistook to claim for the welfare of woman and so is supposed to be supported and nourished by woman only. To the grosser sense feminism doesn't talk about the welfare of woman but it is to hold up womanhood first. To sustain feminism, one needs to recognize and then appreciate womanhood. Appropriate respect should be given to those traits, those abstract expressions in woman, which are instil in

them by nature and need to be recognized by the society, by male and by female as well. It not only represents the strength in themselves but also is the floating power of the society. Walling it in is the indispensable requisite of the society to sustain feminism in true sense. Feminism, when meets the harshness of male dominance and suppressed, as we see in *My Last Duchess* by Robert Browning, tends to change its original form and the real feministic strengths in woman are shed off gradually. The power diminishes and it leads to the plea of Women Empowerment i.e. seeking empowerment for the power itself. This non-recognition and oppression of feminism, created to sustain male dominance weakens the power, confidence and self-realization in women. As a result, we find that the concept of feminism is manipulated in a way that it becomes the accepted reality of the society. Social

dogmas, designedly created and maintained to support male dominance, play a crucial role in the society to bring about this accepted manipulated rhythm of feminism. They make a kind of shell, society believes to be within, to lead a secured, easy and convenient life, while it is actually is a wall to keep the eyes of women away from their real strength and the delight within and around. Coming out of this shell is the first and the most difficult step towards sustaining feminism. Then it is a long way to go. Women knowingly or unknowingly fit themselves in that shell. Even wisdom calls to accept this shell. As we see in Shaw's *Candida*. She knows the worth of a woman. She possesses all the traits of womanhood perfectly but still respects these dogmas, again believing that it helps to lead a secure, easy and convenient life for everyone. The results of following these dogmas torment the mind of women and the womanhood in ages leads to be diminished and in return we find manipulated, harsh, indifferent and clever women such as Emilia of *Othello* and Aftab Begum of *Behind the Veil*. As Pramod K. Nayar says:

*Feminism's key assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined and the woman is trained to fit into those roles..... Feministic theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational-sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions, where she does not have power, is treated as a sex object or a procreating machine, has fewer*

*political and financial rights and is abused. (1)*

Behind the Veil, One-Act Play by Rashid Jahan depicts the dogmas capturing womanhood at its peak. But the brilliance is to show that its weirdness is recognized and accepted behind the veil; the shell-discussed above-; but leads to forgetting it all, the sooner you move out of the veil. Rashid Jahan, a medical doctor by profession contributed radiantly in Indian writings. The most significantly she dealt with female issues in her writings. The way, she touched the matters, every time proves to be the brilliance in its own way. She is the writer of excellent fiction. The basic themes of the writings have been issues related to society with a specific note towards sustaining feminism and raising issues related to women. It brought lots of criticism, various kinds of hurdles, and the harshest challenges to her. But the strong personality never stopped the leader within and never let her vociferous self suppressed by the society around. Dr Shahida says for Jahan:

*Women who questioned societal norms and moral values were often scorned and hated. Rashid Jahan faced that defamation and ill treatment yet she did not give up. She continued to work both in theory and practice for women and their progress. (2)*

Working actively as a member of the Progressive Writer's Movement and Indian people's Theatre Association, added to her writings clarity and confidence, but brought

to her many controversies, hurdles, and criticism but nothing could stop the power within the Angarewali. And so, she is listed in the first ever feminist writers/leaders of India. Her father was a kashmeeri Pandit Thakur Das who converted to Islam and took the name Sheikh Abdullah and over the time did a lot for the education of women in India and also established the Women's College at Aligarh Muslim University. She worked insistently for the welfare of women and kept highlighting the injustice done to them through pen and action. Giving the pathetic and painful story of a woman belonging to an elite muslim family, in Behind the Veil, in such a fearless manner shows the powerful personality possessed by Jahan. It is really remarkable that the lady, who had been a fearless, free and supported individual since her childhood and never faced any kind of patriarchal oppression throughout her life, has such a keen insight and understanding of the torment extended to women. Through her writings and social activities, she raised her voice for all the injustice done in the society using the dogmas specifically in the dealings of women.

*Through her contributions, she tried to expose the religious dogmas, challenged the religious hypocrisy of the Maulavis and to share a glimpse of what happens behind the curtains, that are hailed as the keeper of women dignity, in any Muslim household. (3)*

Rashid Jahan's One-Act Play Parde ke Peechhe' was initially published in Urdu

and then translated in English as Behind the Veil in a collection including several works of other male writers, by the name, 'Angaarey' in 1932. The fearless disclosure of the dogmas made to torture a woman brought brutal criticism, and intense backlash for the expression in the play resulting in drawing fatwa to her from muslim controlling authorities and received a government ban of the text. The play clearly shows the patriarchal torments specifically for muslim women. The torments are used in the forms of custom and accepted social dogmas under the powerful umbrella of religion. It shows the oppressed life of a muslim woman. There is a conversation of two muslim women in zenana where they fairly discuss that how weird it is to accept the rules made for women as a custom and how impossible it is to come out of the shell that becomes completely suffocating for the women. It talks about the life of Mohammadi Begam and shows how she is a victim of torturing patriarchy where women's health is taken for granted at its worst. She is subject to forced marital sex, forced reproduction, and all other marital harassments as polygyny imposed on females which they have to accept as a custom and even sometimes they are forced to arrange it for their husbands. The veil in the title symbolically represents that the story or picture behind the satisfying and happy faces of muslim women is quite different. The picture is not only the fact that they suffer a lot but also is their complete understanding of the wrong done to them. It presents the drawbacks of social customs

such as triple talaq, polygyny, compulsion of sex thrust on women in the name of marriage, unwilling pregnancy and least consideration of the health of women. It is all that they discuss in zenana/ behind the Veil.

*Rasheed Jahan's short story in the form of a one-act play Behind the Veil is a bitter rant by a woman living her life in seclusion. In this story Jahan not only investigates what happens 'behind the veil,' but probes into the spatial configurations that determine 'private' and 'public.'* (4)

The play revolves around the story of a muslim elite class woman Mohammadi Begum. She is the wife of a renowned and honored man called Mian sahib in the play and belongs to a very rich and renowned family of the city. Her husband has his own rutba all around and she is supposed to feel highly fortunate to be his wife. Here, in Zenana we find her talking to one of her acquaintance Aftab Begum. It startles Aftab Begum, when Mohammadi expressed her desire to end her life due to sufferings she is going through. Aftab Begum initially blames her for using such words as she is leading a life with all the comforts and facilities. Through the conversation Mohammadi Begum unintentionally reveals the black reality behind the so-called comfort given to her.

The conversation shows the blots thrown on her in the name of religion and custom. Mohammadi begum is 34 years old and has given birth to 17 children. Married at the age of 17, almost every year she gave birth to

one child, only with a gap when her husband was away for a few months. It hampered her physical health brutally. She tells this story to Aftab begum and receives a reply appreciating her husband for arranging such a good medical aid for her. She is frequently attended by nurses and doctors without realizing the reasons behind the need of it. This is what we call the mind stuck in dogmas and tortures for women accepted by the own gender. Mohammadi Begum tells:

*Yes, that's true. Husband, children, a home; I have it all. Youth? Who will call me young? I look like an old woman of seventy. This unending illness; the daily visits by hakims and doctors. And a child every year! Yes, of course, who can be more fortunate than I am? (5)*

Further, Mohammadi begum also reveals how she was attended by unskilled nurses and how it is more like a propaganda of giving her high level medical aid than actually considering for the betterment of her health. She tells that when she was having constant fever Dr Ghayas suggested to get an internal check-up done by a lady doctor. The check up revealed that she is two months' pregnant again. Doctor becomes nervous informing it to her and Mohammadi Begum burst into frustration mixed with anger listening to it. It was all for the shock of the lady doctor too. Mohammadi Begum extends:

*So then, after saying that I was two months pregnant, the lady doctor stared at me with surprise, 'Begum-sahiba, you were saying that you*

*have been bedridden for the last four months and that you get fever every evening. And Dr Ghayas, too, said that you get hundred or a hundred-and-one fever every evening. So then, do you mean...?’ (6)*

At this Mohammadi Begum explains to lady doctor that she can put up this way because she is self-dependant, earns her own money and lives a peaceful life. While Mohammadi Begum is a dependant lady and nobody cares how she ends her life. They all care about their own enjoyment and pleasure. Mohammadi Begum, then tells that she suffers a lot due to the ill health of her children when Aftab Begum points out about their weak body structure. She reveals how she is stopped from feeding her children as her husband doesn't want so. He wants her to be available for sex all the time and if she gets involved in the care of her children, he may have to wait for her when he comes with a desire to use her body for sexual pleasure. And it will be highly annoying and insulting for him. She says:

*How else can they be when they are deprived of their mother's milk? (7)*

Talking about her husband Mohammadi Begum says:

*As far as he is concerned, all pleasure is limited to his own lust. His only worry is that he will be inconvenienced if a child stays with me. He is not concerned, be it night or day. All he wants is for his wife to be available to him at all times. (8)*

She adds that she was threatened constantly by her husband who used to say:

*‘I will remarry if you breastfeed the children. I need a woman at all the time. I don't have the patience to wait while you attend to the children.’ And then you say... (9)*

And this finally moves Aftab Begum a bit but it doesn't last for much. During the conversation Mohammadi Begum also discloses an incident related to her own cousin and her husband's shameless amorousness towards that cousin of hers. This incidence is the blackest reality of woman torment again as an accepted notion or custom. Razia, Mohammadi Begum's cousin was designedly sent close to Mohammadi Begum's husband, so that he may fall for her. It happens, and he expresses his feelings to Razia through a letter. The poor young girl gets extremely nervous at it and shows the letter to Mohammadi Begum. Mohammadi Begum gets very angry at this act of her husband and asks him for a clarification on it. Mian Sahib, contrary to her expectations, without any shame expresses his strong desire to marry Razia, and that too in the name of religion and dogmas. He claims for polygyny allowed in Islam and with all the inhumanity, now, he gives the responsibility to his wife- Mohammadi Begum, to arrange this marriage for him. Muhammadi discloses to Aftab Begum:

*When I lost my cool and said bitter things to him, he began to cajole me and said, ‘Believe me, I am completely smitten with her. For God's sake, help me. It is your duty to help me.’ He used to sit with the*

*Quran Sharif and read out aayats about the kind of hell I will face after death if I don't help my husband. .... He confined himself to a room, lying all the time with his face buried in the bed and all he chanted was, 'Hai Razia, hai Razia.' And I had little choice but to quietly listen to this. (10)*

Moreover, throughout the conversation we also feel how irritated and frustrated Mohammadi begam gets to see her children fighting with each other, getting spoiled and inculcating all bad manners in themselves as there is none to guide or channelize them and Mohammadi Begum has lost all control on her children due to her ill health and having a big number of them to deal with.

The second character in the play is Aftab Begum. She is an acquaintance of Mohammadi Begum. The character reflects the eye that sees all happy life of Mohammadi Begum and is quite unaware and insensitive of the harsh reality of the life of Mohammadi Begum behind the veil. The discussion starts with Mohammadi Begum's desire to end her life. Aftab Begum doesn't take this any seriously and assumes it to be a very immature statement uttered by Mohammadi Begum. Whatever Mohammadi tells her, she keeps on opposing her and shows her firm belief about her happy married life and her Mian's very gentle care towards her. Actually, it's not about defending Mian Sahib but patriarchy. She talks about the ill health or weak structure of Mohammadi Begum's children but doesn't move much at her

response expressing the cruelty of her husband being the reason behind it. When Mohammadi Begum gets annoyed at the behaviour of her children and scolds them bitterly for all the ill-manners shown by them, Aftab Begam adds that the house looks full when there are so many children showing complete insensitivity towards the internal and external commotion and chaos happened there. When discussing the tortures Mohammadi begum is bearing, and when she (Mohammadi Begum) puts with a sigh that if she would have been a Christian, Aftab Begum checks her not to do such blasphemy and then expresses her grief on her son's getting married to a Christian while she desired him to Waheeda- her brother's daughter. She adds that it gives her a lot of pain when she sees the girl she asked for his son since she was a child is now going to a stranger's home.

To conclude, it can be said that this one act play shows several incidents that clearly conveys dominance of social/ religious dogmas over humanity specifically in terms of women. The unconscious surrender to it leads to create a suffocated surrounding for females. The most noticeable part of the scenario is that most of it is created by the victim itself i.e. women. The scariest episode is that of Razia. She is just too young to get married. Her mother herself designs for her marriage to a man who is the age of a father and is married. Humanity gets banished here and no crumbs of womanhood are shown left in her mother. It becomes quite terrifying for a girl of this age to receive love letter from Mian Saheb

whom she looks at as a guardian. She looks for a help and puts the matter to her sister-Mohammadi Begum. Mohammadi Begum gets highly annoyed at it and though sympathetic to Razia, seems to be more concerned about her own family life.

*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. (11)*

She talks to her Mamas, they both considered and deliberated upon the matter, and the marriage of Razia was arranged and she was married off on the third day to avoid all the chaos. Mohammadi Begum takes a sigh of relief as she could save her family and the life of Razia. The same gesture we find in Aftab Begum also. She to all her relax says:

*Allah, Allah, khair salla! All's well that ends well. (12)*

So, to everyone's comfort it was the best way to end this matter. Nobody was harmed and nothing wrong happened despite all the

odds that came in the way. And here again that closed eye towards the existence of women as an individual can be marked clearly. Through-out the scenario, nobody realizes that getting a girl married in a hurry just to save her from the evil designs of a cruel man like Mian Saheb is not a justifiable act for the girl i.e. Razia. She suffers for the fault of others. At this moment when Mian Sahib should have been punished for his monstrous intentions everybody is trying to save herself/himself from him. Mohammadi shows her anger but the same time reveals her concern to secure her marriage with Mian Saheb, the marriage-in which nothing but hatred remains. The concern is revealed in the lines:

*I swear by God, he was so shameless that he didn't even blink his eyes. 'So, what's the harm?' he said, 'I will marry Razia, even if it means a talaq from you.' (13)*

Razia's father is concerned about the safety of his daughter from Mian Sahib but can't question the cruelty and inhuman behaviour Mian Sahib, which is the height of absurdity because all of his actions are solely and strongly nurtured on dogmas and patriarchy and everyone around belongs to these dogmas more than to what Razia deserves. Patriarchy is built to sustain male dominance; to hamper feminisms and is the base of all the inequalities brought to women:

*The inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not not pre-ordained but*

*created by men so that they retain power. Religion, the family, education, the arts, knowledge systems are all social and cultural 'structures' that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality. These structures are effective means of reinforcing male domination because they do not appear oppressive. (14)*

Next is the incident of stopping Mohammadi Begum from breastfeeding her children. This is a crime, most inhuman act, torture to motherhood and creation of an unhealthy society but accepted, sustained and executed in the name of a wife's obedience, loyalty and service to her husband. It makes a good woman and dutiful wife that earns everyone's praise. The supremacy of dogmas is also seen in the behaviour of a well-educated, wise, and strong woman- lady Doctor- whom Mohammadi Begum calls Miss Sahiba. She questions Mohammadi Begum how she could conceive while being bed-ridden for last four months. And when Mohammadi Begum explains her the boundaries she is caged in, and how her health is utterly ignored by everyone in the family, lady doctor keeps mum and doesn't utter a word. No suggestion, no opposing remarks are received from the doctor and her silence also suggests approval of these dogmas. Mohammadi Begum tells:

*I said, 'Aye, Miss Sahib! You are fortunate. You earn money for yourself, you spend it the way you wish to, and sleep in peace. As far as*

*I am concerned, who cares if I go to hell or to heaven! All that they care about is their pleasure and enjoyment. The wretched wife may live or die, all men hunger after is their own lust. The lady doctor, poor thing, just heard me out and kept quiet. (15)*

Character of Aftab begum is fully engrossed with patriarchy, and belief in social dogmas and religious obligations. Her constant defensive attitude at the complaints of Mohammadi proves the fact. Indifference of Aftab Begum while she understands everything can be plainly inferred from this statement:

*Mohammadi Begum, wherever you go, you will find the same problem. Men seem to have their way all along. They triumph in all situations- tails they win, heads we lose. Now tell me, isn't it bad enough to say, 'I will remarry', that he also insists that, 'My wife is the one who must arrange it!' (16)*

And the most alarming is her casual behaviour in the concluding part of the play- when Mohammadi Begum reveals what problems she actually is having in her body- is a kind of threat to feminism. She listens to azaan and expresses her regret how she could forget namaz and everything else in getting involved in chatting with Mohammadi. We also find her relishing the incident of Razia. Upper- hand of patriarchy has numbed all other senses in her and feminism is not at all known or considered by her. As far as established religious rules

like the concept of triple talaq (as Mian Saheb Keeps on threatening Mohammadi Begum) and polygeny are concerned, no question can be raised for it while it is a clear oppression of feminism.

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