

Based on literary radicalism in india by p.gopal

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



In 1947, the newly independent nation of India was wrought with predominantly two modes of nationalistic ideas, the distinction between which can be understood as the difference between what Neil Lazarus called the 'nationalists' and the 'nationalitarians'. The 'nationalists', like Nehru, considered this moment to be the rebirth of the nation – the past was over and all that lay ahead was the future. Meanwhile, the 'nationalitarians' like the Progressive Writers Association (PWA), regarded this the perfect time for reconstructing the nation that had yet to recover from its past. (Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India*, 2005) This scope of thought is explored by them in *Angarey* (1932), an anthology of short stories. This essay will attempt to justify the claim, through examples from three short stories published in *Angarey*, that this reconstruction in regards to "the woman question" was to be made through the unveiling of the domestic sphere and enabling the women to escape from it on their own terms, rather than through social reforms that failed to penetrate the private spaces.

Sajjad Zaheer's short story, 'Dulari', is an excellent example of this. Dulari ("darling") is fed and raised by a family that uses her as unpaid labour. The other paid labourers and maid servants in the house, though not entirely different from Dulari, consider themselves above her simply because they still retain some power over their own bodies and life that enables them to choose to work rather than be forced to do so. Although Dulari does not complain about this injustice, it is not because she is unaware of the exploitation but because she is unfamiliar with the outside world where she would have to escape to in order to regain her self-respect. Her real emancipation comes not when the eldest son, who considers himself a social

reformer despite his share in the injustice meted out to her, attempts to show her some “ kindness” but when she claims her rights over her own life and body back by running away to be a sex worker. As a sex worker, she is lower than a bonded labourer on the social ladder. Yet, now, she is more free than she ever was, simply because she was able to break free from the chains of the domestic space on her own terms. Her determination to retain this independence, “ even as she sits on the ground draped in a white sheet, a monument to ruin and repentance”, yet unaffected by the ridicule of the society is what “ is recalcitrant about her.”(Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India*, 2005)

Meanwhile, in Rashid Jahan’s ‘ Parde ke Peeche’, literal and figurative veils obscure Mohammadi Begum from the outside world, confining her to the domestic sphere where she is exploited by her husband. Her inability to reach out beyond the veil to get what she desires – a solution to her misery – becomes apparent when even the female doctor is unable to provide any relief to her suffering. When all else fails, her desire to commit suicide becomes an attempt on her part to regain some control over her life which was always denied to her by the society and her husband. Her failed attempts to merge her private space, where she is exploited, with the public space where the doctors and the rest of the world exists, in order to find a solution to her misery, then becomes the reason for her continued oppression in her unpenetrated domestic space.

While these stories clearly establish the link between the penetration of social reforms into the domestic spaces and the emancipation of women,

they also do not fail to demonstrate the ridicule and discomfort that women who enter the predominantly male public spaces are subjected to. In Rashid Jahan's ' Dilli Ki Sairi', this becomes apparent in the stares and leers that greet Mallika Begum as she sits on a pile of luggage, awaiting the return of her husband who has abandoned her at the railway station to meet a friend. Despite the fact that she is covered in her purdah, she becomes the subject of interest for the men around her, who see her as a strange, fascinating being for sitting alone in a public space. However, the story does not intend to discourage women from entering the public space, rather, it drives home the perils of " allowing" women to enter the public space through the " kindness" of the menfolk rather than on their own terms. (Priyamvada Gopal, Literary Radicalism in India, 2005)

It becomes apparent here that the " benevolent", forceful merger of the women's public and private spaces as well as the complete failure to merge the two, are equally counter-productive to reformation. Therefore, the real reformation lies in providing women with tools to carve a place for themselves in the public space, through various struggles, on their own.