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Gender, Class and Religion: A Study of Sajjad Zaheer's “Dulārī” and “Heaven Assured!”

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Abstract. A distinguished Urdu writer, Syed Sajjad Zaheer, was a major contributor to the revolutionary text, *Angarey* that laid the foundation of the Progressive Writers' Movement in colonial India. He emerged as one of the strongest pillars of the movement that ushered in an era where literature became a medium to bring about social reform. The present paper attempts to study two short stories, “Dulārī” and “Jannat ki Bashārat” by Sajjad Zaheer that have, like the other stories in the collection ignited much furore and controversy. The paper shall discuss the themes of vulnerability, domestic servitude and exploitation of women in a patriarchal and feudal society as well as religious duplicity and hypocrisy practiced in the society. The paper shall also trace the publication of *Angarey* as a path-breaking text and the rise of the Progressive Writers' Movement which aimed at demolishing the existing conservatism and orthodoxy deeply embedded into the socio-cultural milieu.

Keywords. Patriarchy, Gender, Class, Religious duplicity.

Defending the trailblazing *Angarey*, Prof. Mohammad Mujib, who taught at Jamia Millia Islamia under the vice-chancellorship of Zakir Husain, the former President of India, states:

Angarey is ‘angare’, glowing coals - and not merely stories - in the true sense! These do not present life as such but a special kind of existence. Their purpose is to impact our senses in a very unique way- to burn and demolish much that exists in our society. The existing thoughts, faith, social values have been ridiculed in some places and their weaknesses and demerits have been identified in others. Stark images of poverty, helplessness, vulnerability and illiteracy present in Muslim society co-exist with this. There is also a clear protest against the tyranny of the empowered classes.... (Alvi and Chauhan xx)

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Born on November 5th 1899, in Lucknow, Syed Sajjad Zaheer was a Marxist revolutionary writer who made a significant contribution radicalizing Urdu literature. He is best known for the controversial *Angarey* (1932), a collection of nine short stories and a one act play originally written in Urdu, which he edited and to which he contributed five stories. The slim volume offended the orthodox sections of the pre-independence Indian society and generated a great furore and protest particularly amongst the members of the Muslim community.

Fondly known as Banney bhai among relatives and friends, Syed Sajjad Zaheer was the privileged son of Syed Wazir Hasan, the Chief Justice of Oudh. He was educated at Oxford, England where he obtained a degree in Law. He was deeply influenced by the Communist ideology, particularly by the British-Indian Communist leader, Shapurji Saklatvala and joined the Oxford Majlis. He also attended the Second Congress of the League against imperialism held in Frankfurt where he became acquainted with leaders like Viren Chattopadhyay, Saumendranath Tagore, N.M. Jaisoorya and Raja Mahendra Pratap.

While he was studying, Sajjad Zaheer read Marx's *Das Capital* and Lenin's *What is to be Done?* which further strengthened his belief in Communism. He also befriended the famous Indian novelist, Mulk Raj Anand with whom he attended the International Congress for Defense of Culture organised by the French author and Nobel Laureate, Andre Gide in Paris. The conference served as an early influence which led to the formation of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association in London.

Besides *Angarey*, he also wrote a novel, *London ki ek Raat* (*A Night in London*; 1942). His letters to his wife from prison, while he was serving term for the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case were edited and published by her as *Nuqūsh-e Zindān* (Prison letters; 1951). He reflected upon the early phase and growth of the Progressive Writers' Movement in his memoir, *Roshnāi* (*The Light*; 1956). He wrote a commentary on the works of the legendary Persian poet, Hafiz, entitled *Zikr-e Hafiz* (An Account of Hafiz; 1956) and published a collection of poems, *Pighlā Neelam* (*Melted Sapphire*; 1964). Zaheer also edited a number of magazines such as *Bhārat*, *Chingārī*, *Qaumi Jang*, *Nayā Zamāna*, *Awāmi Daur*, and *Hayāt*, all of which were Marxist socialist in flavor. He translated Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Gora* and Shakespeare's *Othello* into Urdu.

Of all his works, *Angarey* remains the most controversial text due to its radical expression of the social ills prevalent in the society. The four major contributors to *Angarey* were Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan and Mahmuduzzafar who hailed from the educated elites of the society. They

were greatly influenced by the writings of psychological novels of James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence and their stream of consciousness technique. This influence is evident in their brilliant use of the stream of consciousness and interior monologue techniques in these stories. They lead to an exploration of the inner conflicts and dilemmas experienced by the characters. The crisp, staccato style is remarkable and consciously assertive. There seems a lack of well-organized plot and the stories often end abruptly. Figuratively, they employ alliterative sounds and words, metaphors and symbolism, incoherent and jumbled up thoughts and images. An admixture of passion and imagination enhances their aesthetic sensibility. There are iconic images of a blissful heaven on the one hand while that of a raging hell on the other. Written with profound emotional intensity, the stories are loaded with wit, irony, humour and sarcasm.

These *Angarey* writers were extremely critical of the conservatism, hypocrisy and religious pretence deeply embedded in Muslim society; besides, the corrosive impact of imperialism in India. They unsparingly criticized the travesty of religion and its ritualistic observance. They exposed the duplicity practised in the garb of religion and oppression under patriarchal authority. Their writings were a sensitive portrayal of exploitation of weaker sections of the society. They voiced the agonies of women who silently suffered “behind the veil”. Mirroring social realities, these firebrand writers reflected upon the indifferent and oppressive attitude of men towards women who led claustrophobic lives within the *zanāna* (women’s quarter) and bear the brunt of restrictive customs, religious bigotry and male chauvinism.

Vibha S. Chauhan, in her Introduction to the English translation of *Angarey* writes:

The vision of a classless and oppressionless society, free from religious and social dogmas, gender and class oppression and political subjugation is what fired up their writing. It was this range of highly incongruent influences which actually prepared the ground in which the seed of protest-through-literature could be sown (Alvi and Chauhan xxxii).

All four contributors were visionaries who were conscious of the significant role of the writer and the connection between literature and the society as a whole. They questioned the established norms and became agents of change and progress. Their writings were thought provoking particularly in an era when the society was grappling with orthodoxies and dogmas. They became an embodiment of enlightenment working towards social equality and justice. All four writers were committed to liberate the society from Gender, Class and Religion: A Study of Sajjad Zaheer’s ...

ignorance and conservatism. Together with Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, an enigmatic contributor to *Angarey* was a successful writer. An academician, poet, novelist, translator and critic, he is best known for his epoch-making novel, *Twilight in Delhi*, which offers glimpses of a lost culture under the heels of colonialism. Mahmuduzzafar was also a committed writer and an active nationalist who later married Rashid Jahan, the only woman contributor to *Angarey*. Rashid Jahan lampooned as “*Angarewali*” was an extraordinarily courageous and free-spirited writer. A doctor by profession, she was a staunch feminist who revolutionized the Indian stage with her bold expression of women’s oppression in her one act play “Behind the Veil”, a realistic and poignant portrayal of the domestic life of Muslim women.

Angarey comprises five short stories by Sajjad Zaheer, namely “Garmiyon ki ek Rāt” (“A Summer Night”), “Dulārī”, “Jannat ki Bashārat” (“Heaven Assured!”), “Neend Nahin Āti” (“Insomnia”) and “Phir Yeh Hangama” (“The Same Uproar, Once Again”), two by Ahmed Ali, namely, “Baadal Nahin Āte” (“The Clouds Don’t Come”), “Mahavatton ki ek Rāt” (“A Night of Winter Rain”), one short story by Mahmuduzzafar, namely, “Javaṁmardi” (“Masculinity”), and a short story, “Dilli ki Sair” (“A Trip to Delhi”) and a one-act play, “Parde ke Peechhe” (“Behind the Veil”) by Rashid Jahan.

Angarey offered a powerful portrayal of an ailing society. It aimed at highlighting how hypocrisy, injustice, class conflict and sexual oppression had so deeply been rooted into the social milieu that it has been practiced disregarding all norms of a civilized society. The image that the book reflected of the perverted social order was condemned on the charges of obscenity and profaneness. It was perceived as a mockery of religion ridiculing the rituals, traditions, customs and practices that were observed by the Muslims. It was regarded as a blasphemous text.

The anthology was consequently banned in 1933 after severe protest and agitation by the government of the United Provinces under Section 295 A of the Indian Penal Code and the copies of the book were burnt. Mirza Mohammad Jawwad, the owner of the Nizami Press, where *Angarey* was printed, was summoned by the City Magistrate of Lucknow and was asked to apologize in writing for having hurt the religious sentiments of the public. The *Hindustan Times* published an article entitled, “Urdu Pamphlet Denounced: Shias Gravely Upset.” It stated:

The Central Standing Committee of the All-India Shia Conference at this meeting strongly condemns the heart-rending and filthy pamphlet called ‘Angare’ compiled by Sajjad

Zaheer, Ahmad Ali, Rashid Jehan and Mahmuduz Zafar which has wounded the feelings of the entire Muslim community by ridiculing God and his Prophets and which is extremely objectionable from the standpoints of both religion and morality. The Committee further strongly urges upon the attention of the U.P. Government that the book be at once proscribed (Alvi and Chauhan xvii).

However, despite severe criticism and angry protests, the contributors refused to apologize for its publication. On April 5, 1933, an article titled, "In Defence of *Angarey*" written by Ahmed Ali and Mahmuduzzafar was published in the newspaper, *The Leader*, brought out from Allahabad. It was subtitled, "Shall We Submit to Gagging?" and unapologetically condemned this strangulation as a coercion of the freedom of speech.

The paper shall now discuss the two short stories, "Dulārī" and "Heaven Assured!" by Sajjad Zaheer. These stories sketch a grave picture of the prevailing injustices, including enslavement, rigid customs and practices, economic inequality, class conflict, gender disparity and oppression and exhibit how adherence to such practices debase the human condition. The most striking quality that the reader witnesses in these stories is their realism and proximity to real life situations. Zaheer breathes life into his characters who would make the readers empathize.

"Dulārī" is a tale of pain and suffering endured by the female protagonist, Dulārī, 'the loved one', a slave girl who has been bought like a commodity and who serves unconditionally without being paid any wages except provisions of food, clothing and shelter. The story is set in the affluent home of Sheikh Nazim Ali Khan. Dulārī has lived in this house since her childhood, raised as a *laundi*, an unpaid servant. No one knows where she came from and the home where she lives was her only shelter. Zaheer notes bluntly: "The family members were quite kind to her – after all, the people from the higher classes always take care of the ones from the lower classes!" (Alvi and Chauhan 11).

As a child, Dulārī played and grew up with Chhoti Ṣaḥibzādī, Haseena Begum, the younger daughter of the family. With the passage of time, economic and class differences between the two became evident. While Haseena Begum would spend most of her time reading and writing, or learning needlework, Dulārī was made to work endlessly, sweeping and cleaning the house, filling water and spending her time in household work. She was employed in the service of Begum Sahiba, the wife of Sheikh Nazim Ali Khan. However, her position was even worse than that of the other servants in the house. In case of a quarrel with any of the servants

she was immediately reminded of her lowly status. She was humiliated and mocked at: “I am not a *laundi* like you” (11). Dulārī then suffered silently. Dulārī grew into a charming, good-looking girl and though she was always shabbily dressed and looked unkempt, on festivals or special occasions when she went out with the ladies of the family, she wore fine clothes and looked very attractive.

The story shifts to the auspicious night of shab-e-barāt, on the fourteenth day of the month of Shaban, in accordance with the Islamic calendar, when Dulārī dressed up and “looked like a doll” (12). She sat watching the fireworks unconscious of the fire, heedless to the darkness into which she would be driven and from where there was no turning back, which was to burn her life into ashes.

Kazim, the twenty-one-year-old elder son of the family, is introduced as being annoyed with the orthodox and unsophisticated ways of his family. However, he does little to bring about any change. He seems quiet and aloof. Kazim becomes the cause of Dulārī’s ruin as he seduces her. Zaheer states: “The mental and intellectual worlds of these two individuals were as far apart as the sky and the earth are. Yet they felt as if their desires had found a refuge. In truth, they were drifting on an ocean of dark forces like aimless twigs of straw” (13).

The story then shifts to the celebration of Kazim’s wedding. The entire house is full of guests and preparations are being made when one night, Dulārī disappears. After a great search, Dulārī was found by an old servant in the prostitutes’ locality and brought back to the house after much persuasion. Dulārī was welcomed with hate, scorn and humiliation, and covered from head to toe in a white *chadar*. Her childhood companion “the modest, chaste and unpolluted Haseena Begum pitied the poor girl with all her heart but could not comprehend how any girl could abandon and step out of the safety of the home where she had spent her whole life” (15). Haseena Begum now maintained a distance from Dulārī whose mere shadow would defile her. Zaheer offers a blatant sarcasm that points at class and monetary disparities: “While it was true that her reputation has been completely destroyed, it was not as significant a loss for a *laundi* as it would have been for a respectable woman. She could be married off to one of the servants. Everything would be back to normal again, soon” (15).

Born into the lowest class, Dulārī, it seems, had no right to have a better future. Her will did not matter. She was a mere commodity to be used according to the whims of her owner. Dulārī, thus, sat silently like an escaped convict who has been caught and thrown into a claustrophobic cell. She was surrounded by the members of the entire household who had

assembled to witness the spectacle of shame and admonishment. Commenting on the bleak picture, Zaheer states: “The vultures preying on the dead bodies of animals do not realize that the defenceless body into which they jab their foul beaks are, despite being dead, better than those like them who are alive” (16). Dulārī was heartbroken by Kazim’s indifference and the sight of him and his beautiful bride. Her disappearance from the safe home a second time must be understood as a silent protest and an act of defiance.

In “Dulārī”, Zaheer has effectively exposed the exploitation of women within the four walls of the so called sharif household. The story reflects upon the theme of domestic servitude and oppression in which a low-class, poor girl is victimized by a sophisticated and hypocritical patriarchal society. While her oppressor, Kazim continues to live a respectable life, the oppressed Dulārī faces ignominy and is forced to live a life of defamation and shame. She is physically and emotionally tarnished and humiliated. Dulārī, thus, falls prey to an unjust, class-conscious and insensitive social order.

While “Dulārī” throws light on the vulnerability of women, gendered and class oppression, by questioning the injustice and hypocrisy of the civilized society, Zaheer’s other story, “Heaven Assured!” offers a shocking commentary on religious duplicity. Zaheer gives a light-hearted comic tone to the story which mocks at the excessive piety and abstinence of a Maulvi. The story is set in Lucknow and centres around Maulvi Mohammad Daud Sahib, well known for his wisdom, strict adherence to religious rituals, prayer, discipline and abstinence. He taught in a madrasa and was a devout Muslim. In the holy month of Ramzan, he would fast and offer namaṣ with absolute discipline and heartfelt dedication and sincerity. He would spend the whole night reciting the Quran. Zaheer introduces him:

Maulvi Daud Sahib, also known as the Maulana, was about fifty years old and though short in height, was physically strong. His complexion was wheatish, he sported a triangular beard, and his white hair was peppered with black. The Maulana had been married off when he was about nineteen or twenty years old, but his first wife had passed away giving birth to their eighth child. He remarried two years later, when he was forty-nine, but his second wife pestered him endlessly. There was an age gap of about twenty years between them. He often tried to tell her that the reason why he had greyed prematurely was chronic phlegm, but she would offer other kinds of evidence right away, which the Maulana could not challenge, and he was thus

left with no option but silence (19).

It was *shab-e-qadr* or the Night of Revelation. Maulvi Daud Sahib, like many other pious Muslims, had plans to pray through the night in order to receive the mercy of God, to seek His forgiveness and to wash off all his past sins. Zaheer comically presents the dilemma into which Maulvi Sahib is caught battling against the tug of war between an overfed body and his soul craving for God's grace and mercy. He finally decides to leave the mosque and go home to pray there. As he reached home, it was still dark. His youthful wife was sleeping under the spell of the star-studded sky. He gently enquires about the matchbox. The young wife pulls him to herself seductively. Zaheer describes the emotional throbbing of the Maulvi in a sarcastically: "The Maulana's heart, too, cut a caper for a moment but, the very next instant, he recalled the longings of Havva, Adam's first lapse, the passion of Zulekha, and Yusuf's tattered clothes. His memory summoned a complete list of the transgressions of women and helped to rein him in" (21).

Maulvi sahib successfully frees himself the enchanting lure of his wife, who is infuriated. He feels humiliated as his wife calls him "a tottering old man" (21). Zaheer comments on his plight: "Nothing is more painful for an aged husband than to have his young wife call him old" (21). However, he silently lights the lantern, spreads his prayer mat and starts reciting the Quran. His overfed belly and the recital of the Surah Rahman lulled him to sleep while still sitting on the prayer mat. Maulvi Sahib dreams he is in heaven. He could listen to a voice asking him to bow down in obeisance, which he follows out of fear and obedience. He then finds himself in a splendidly decorated hall with richly coloured walls. In these walls there were about sixty or seventy windows and, in each window, stood a naked houri. At first, the Maulana feels embarrassed but the next moment his youthful vigour returns and he gets closer to the houris scrutinizing their nude bodies while each time reciting the durood. As he finally approaches one of the houris and holds her in a tight embrace, he suddenly listens to the loud laughter of his wife that wakes him up. It was morning and he was lying on the prayer mat tightly embracing the Holy Quran while his wife stood there laughing at him. Zaheer mocks Maulvi Daud for faking religiosity and his sexual depravity, and with him, all other Maulvis for whom he is very likely, a prototype. By ridiculing the Maulvi, Zaheer actually ridicules the very notion of ritualistic prayer and religious belief.

Zaheer has set both of the stories, "Dulārī" and "Heaven Assured!" satirical in tone, against ritualistic religious occasions and uses these occasions to ridicule and criticize religious duplicity and hypocrisy. He effectively highlights how religion has been reduced into a mere show of

religious rituals, customs and practices rather than an authentic realization of the principles and understanding in its true essence. Religion has become a plaything in the hands of such religious Maulvis who waver between preaching and practice.

A similar tone of mockery and sarcasm is echoed in Zaheer's "The Same Uproar, Once Again" ("Phir Yeh Hangāma") which begins with an ironical exaltation of religion. Written in the stream of consciousness technique, the story lacks a conventional plot. Rather, it presents jumbled up and incoherent ideas in the form of a conversation between two friends. One of them seems to praise religion as the ultimate power that gives solace in times of distress and heals injured hearts. The other gives the sublime discussion a comical turn as he was more perturbed by his "internal state" (38). He had a stomach ache and urgently needs a laxative.

The story brings forth a montage of images: hunger, starvation, famines, cholera, epidemic, disease, pallid faces, sunken eyes, wrinkled skin, flies and death. Zaheer, perhaps, mirrors the crude reality where humanity suffers and groans in acute pain. While human beings die of starvation, poverty, famines, lack of resources and are crushed by oppression, orthodoxy, conservatism and colonialism, apostles of faith go around preaching religion. When fear and uncertainty grip the world, they talk of faith and conviction. Zaheer, thus, ridicules the fanaticism and bigotry which remain insensitive to the internal state of an ailing humanity.

Zaheer's candid expression, his defiance of the sham of respectability, and religious orthodoxy all contributed to the proscription of *Angarey*. However, despite severe criticism and controversy the collection still managed to survive and influence a generation of young writers desiring social, political and cultural change. Zaheer's *Angarey* stories are a protest against conventional orthodoxies and double standards of a cultured society.

Syed Sajjad Zaheer was a radicalized writer who turned the tide of Urdu fiction by challenging rigid conventions, religious dogmas and social mores in an attempt at social transformation. Faiz Ahmed Faiz's requiem for Sajjad Zaheer, 'The Wise Man of the Tavern' is a tribute to him and his contribution to Urdu literature as a writer who subverted conservatism and forged a new direction that changed literary trends forever:

Na ab ham sāth sair-e-gul karenge
Na ab mil kar sar-e-maqtal challenge
Hadis-e-dilbarān baham karenge
Na Khūn-e-dil se sharh-e gham karenge

Na laila-e-sukhan ki dostdārī

Na ghamba-e-vatan par ashkbārī

Sunenge naghma-e-zanjir mil kar

Na shab bhar mil ke chhalkaenge sāghar

(We'll roam no more in the valley of roses

Nor sit side by side under the shade of the gallows

Gloomy twilights will not catch us in our frenzied search in the
Desert

Nor shall we stroll in the sunshine along boulevards of lovely
women

We'll talk no more of those we loved- the ravishers of hearts,

Nor write of our agony with our blood....) (Satchidanandan 8)

Syed Sajjad Zaheer's personality is inseparable from the Progressive Writers' Movement. With the publication of *Angarey*, he laid the foundation of a movement which burgeoned over the ages.

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