

## Book Review

Yaqin, Amina. *Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Pakistani Urdu Writing*. pp294. Anthem Press 2021.

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Amina Yaqin's book, *Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Pakistani Urdu Writing* explores the legacy of twentieth century feminist Urdu poets in Pakistan within the context of women's movements and transnational approaches to sexuality, class, culture and gender. Reviewing the history of the Urdu language as a *lingua franca*, Yaqin critically responds to women's narratives in Urdu that have been suppressed by the moralistic societal impositions prevalent in male literary circles. She interrogates responses towards gender and sexuality by reference to middle-class Urdu women poets.

The introductory discussion overviews the poetic genre as rooted in the aesthetic, cultural and literary ambiance within the South Asian context while often turning into an activist medium by challenging political discourses. Using interdisciplinary methodological approaches, she uses the examples of postcolonial Urdu poetry produced by progressive women poets who have resisted gendered identities imposed on them by male Urdu writers. The author develops a convincing position that poetry and politics intersect and intertwine, negotiating Islamic and liberal values and expressing political resistance during the anticolonial movement. Historical traces are explored through a review of the work of earlier Urdu poets such as Zubunisa Begum (the daughter of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb) Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (1786-1824) a courtesan from Hyderabad, and folk heroines such as Sohni, Chand Bibi, Mira Bai, Razia Sultana) Lalla Ded (1320-1392), and Huba Khatun (a Kashmiri). Questioning the obscurity of the *zenana* (women's quarters) and the expectations that women would perform their familial roles, duties and identities, Yaqin identifies the *zenana* as becoming a symbol of

revolutionary activity rather than confinement, resulting in the political mobilisation of women, for example the case of Sarojini Naidu. Her discussion stresses the significance of exploring the personal stories of women such as Naidu and Cornelia Sorabji. She highlights the paradox of women camouflaging their identities by using male pen names while writing about female emancipation and education and believing in reform through female education since they were absent from the public sphere. The author examines the post-partition phase of women's poetry as an alternative literary resource reflecting the modern Pakistani woman's focus on the self and subjectivity as opposed to conformity. This discussion reflects on how such women were supported by a few progressive male counterparts such as Habib Jalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

Chapter Two explores the representation of gender in Urdu texts by examining social contexts, linguistic registers and literary forms and exploring how the hybridity of such voices has been overlooked. Yaqin's discussion highlights the centrality of women's moral and ethical behavior in the light of colonial educational practices. She analyses the reforms of *zenana* in the Aligarh and Deoband schools of thought. The concept of women's expression as *begmati zaban* (Women's language) and *rekhti* (deliberate gendering of the female voice) and *niswani zaban* reflected the *zenana* as the inner cultural sphere of women. The author also traces the association of Urdu with Rekhta, Turkish and Indo-Aryan Hindi. She critiques the way male authors flattened gendered voices in representative Urdu novels like *Murat ul Aroos*, *Umrao Jaan Ada* and through the genres of *rekhti*, novels, diaries, travelogues and

religious manuals. The chapter critically reflects on the crisis of masculinity during the Progressive Writers' Movement and this so-called period of reform that saw the control and censorship of creative inputs by women writers.

Chapter three focuses on *mushairas* (public poetry recitals) in the first half of the twentieth century. She observes how sexual politics and the Progressive Writers' Movement discouraged feminist poetic activism by excluding women from such public discourses. The first half of the chapter discusses how Ismat Chughtai's work only received support from Saadat Hasan Manto who himself became controversial around the time for his stories, for example *Bu*. Both writers defied the stereotypical roles of women defined by the society. Sexuality was a forbidden and controversial topic at the time and also divided the progressives into two groups, the radical and the creative/experimental. The author sheds light on Faiz's stance that women are public intellectuals and challenged the way the State's involvement in cultural politics impacted Urdu literary culture. The second half of the chapter overviews the challenges faced by Ada Jaffery and Zehra Nigah, both trendsetters in Urdu poetry. Furthermore, Parveen Shakir was critiqued as being 'apolitical, sentimental and conformist'. While Sara Shagufta's literary role was impacted by her abusive husband and critical about societal prejudices and sexual violence.

Chapter Four presents an in-depth discussion on Fehmida Riaz's lifelong struggle of migration, traumatic marriage and literary career of contributing poetry, prose, fiction, metaphorical storytelling, and journalistic writings in Urdu. She traces many influences on her work, including Taoism, *adivasi* (indigenous) culture, multilingual Indic, Islamic and Sufi traditions (despite regarding herself as an atheist), and lyricist influences from Iran and from Faiz. Appreciating her stylistic experimentation with the formal structures of Urdu, Yaqin finds Riaz's work to be influenced by key feminist movements which created a gendered and sacred-secular perspective in her poetry. Criticised for her erotic language, socio-religious and cultural constructions, her work also challenged the hyper-masculine stance projected by the Progressive Writers' Movement that excluded women from the literary sphere. Working from this context, Yaqin comments on Fehmida's poems from the period around East Pakistan's independence (1968-1973) and her time in exile (1981-1987). Her poetic themes reflected existential crisis, the facing of taboos, faith, objectification of the female body, honor, and shame; she also challenged the political dynamics and religious fundamentalism of Zia's military regime and the *hudoood ordinance* that forced her to take refuge in

India. Her poem 'Naya Bharat' criticises the Babri Mosque incident in 1992.

The final chapter explores the work of Kishwar Naheed (born in 1940), who was popularly known as the Virginia Woolf of Pakistan. She had multiple personas as a civil servant, broadcaster, presenter and activist. Her global recognition and bold writing style made her a controversial figure in Pakistan to the extent that her translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) was banned in the country on the grounds of allegations of obscenity and had to be published in India in 1994. She depicted the female body as a text and her work (like Fehmida's) also depicted the themes of love, marriage, desire and confinement. Yaqin has succinctly analysed her autobiography *Buri Aurat ki Katha* and her poem, 'Hear Me' which addresses the prime minister while questioning the rights of women and minorities.