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## The Women of the PWA: The Politics and Writings of Rashid Jahan and Qurratulain Hyder

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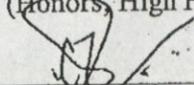
The Women of the PWA: The Politics and Writings of Rashid Jahan and Qurratulain Hyder

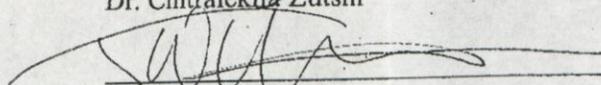
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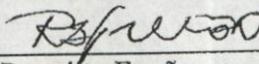
by

Mehr Ali

Accepted for                     HIGH HONORS                      
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

  
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May 2, 2018

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## **Introduction: Review of Scholarship**

The publication of *Angarey* in 1932 sent ripples through the Urdu literary scene as well as Indian society at large.<sup>1</sup> This collection of 9 short stories and a play by a group of young progressive writers, which consisted of Sajjad Zahir, Mahmudduzafar, Rashid Jahan, and Ahmed Ali, offered a scathing critique of conservative Indian society, social ills such as poverty and misogyny, as well as conservative religiosity that restricted critical and freethinking. Its publication led to widespread protest throughout India, angering the colonial government as well as various segments of Indian civil society, all of whom deemed the book to be obscene, vulgar, and offensive to peoples' religious sensibilities. Following the backlash that their book ignited, the group of writers formally established the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) in 1936. Controversial yet influential in colonial India, with the partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947, the association also split along national lines. In both newly independent states, the PWA soon rose as a prominent outlet for leftist writers and intellectuals, providing a space for the articulation of ideas of secularism, progress, and egalitarianism.

There has been a wide variety of writing published on the progressive literary movement in South Asia, with the scholarship on the PWA detailing the many different facets of the organization and critiquing the writings produced by many of its members. Largely however, the scholarship on the association tends to focus on its impact on Urdu literature, the influence leftist politics had on it, and the critiques of gender and class that the various writings of PWA writers produced.

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<sup>1</sup> Sajjad Zahir, *Angarey: 9 stories and a Play* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014).

## Impact on Urdu Literature

Broadly, much of the scholarship on the PWA acknowledges and highlights the impact that *Angarey* and the other literary works of its members had on the development and evolution of Urdu literature and its politicization. Bhisham Sahni<sup>2</sup> exemplifies this characterization of the movement's impact on literature and its centrality to broader trends in the shifting socio-political situation in the subcontinent during the late- and post-colonial era. Highlighting a stylistic change within Urdu literature, Sahni describes in depth the way that the writings of many PWA members broke from the highly stylized and romanticized works that had previously dominated Urdu literature and art,<sup>4</sup> and describes how the writers took up addressing societal concerns while “showing a strong grasp on contemporary reality and tracing the weaknesses of Indian society.”<sup>5</sup>

Shabana Mahmud's article, too, highlights the “major change in the form and content of Urdu literature” ushered in by the works of Progressive writers,<sup>6</sup> along with exemplifying the way that the movement has been placed into the broader context of the emergence of nationalism in South Asia. Writing of the politicization of the PWA's work, Mahmud emphasizes that with the Association's founding, Urdu literature began to take on nationalist overtones. The progressive movement politicized language and soon attempted to push for the recognition of regional South Asian languages, with the writers dreaming “of winning for Urdu and the regional languages the same respect and for the Indian people the same dignity which other civilized

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<sup>2</sup> Bhisham Sahni, "The Progressive Writers' Movement," *Indian Literature* 29, no. 6 (1986): 178-183.

<sup>3</sup> See also, Ralph Russell, "The Pursuit of Urdu Literature," *London: Zed* (1992).

<sup>4</sup> See also, Rochono Majumdar, "Debating Radical Cinema: A History of the Film Society Movement in India," 2012. *Modern Asian Studies* 46 (3): 731-67.

<sup>5</sup> Sahni, 179.

<sup>6</sup> Shabana Mahmud, "Angare and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1996): 447.

languages and societies enjoyed.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, by framing the PWA in a strong nationalist narrative, Mahmud describes the Association’s members and the subject matter of their Urdu writings as being no longer dictated “by any foreign influence but by the social conditions and the degrading state of society.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, she argues that the writers looked inwards to the state of socio-political disarray that existed in their own society and religion to inform their literary output.<sup>9</sup>

### **Influence of Leftist Politics**

Beyond its placement within the narrative of the mid-twentieth century South Asian nationalism, the scholarship on the Progressive Writers’ Association also places the literary collective within a global narrative of leftist politics and anti-imperialist movements. In his article, Ben Conisbee Baer argues that the movement, while aiming to address specific regional, cultural, and political issues within the subcontinent, was also closely tied to global developments such as the rise of fascism.<sup>10</sup> Along with discussing the influence of Russian socialism, the scholarship on the subject also highlights the fact that the PWA was a part of the global movement against fascism. With many in the colonized world seeing fascism as being aligned with imperialism, according to Baer, the “PWA considered the national level of cultural work to be a metonymic of the international whole,” and saw anti-fascism and anti-colonialism as going hand in hand, since various policies that fascism entailed were developed through the practices of colonial governments.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 448.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 455.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Conisbee Baer, "Shit Writing: Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, the Image of Gandhi, and the Progressive Writers' Association," *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 3 (2009): 575-595.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 583.

Tied into this, the general consensus in the scholarship remains that the members of the literary movement were heavily influenced by global developments in socialist and Marxist theory. The Russian Revolution prompted an uptick in the circulation of socialist literature which circulated throughout the colonial world, and thus came to be deeply influential for the leftist youth of colonial India, granting them a theoretical framework within which to articulate their desire for social equality and freedom from oppressive colonial regimes.<sup>12</sup> The progressive writers were no exception to this, and were all heavily informed by the emerging leftist ideologies of the time, with prominent writers such as Sajjad Zahir even going on to play a major role in the Communist Party of Pakistan. The Marxist influence on the PWA is especially clear in the literature on the progressive movement in the post-colonial era and the discussion of the Pakistani offshoot of the Progressive Writers' Association, as it makes clear the critical role that Marxism and socialism played in giving a voice to the fledgling state's leftist movement. Kamran Asdar Ali's "Communists in a Muslim Homeland: Cultural Debates in Pakistan's Early Years" discusses in detail how in its early years Pakistan was an "unstable configuration of shifting alliances and competing ideologies."<sup>13</sup> With the country working to carve its identity, the All Pakistan Progressive Writers' Association, with its socialist and Marxist stance and close alignment with the Communist Party of Pakistan, aimed to create a vision for the country based in secularism, democracy, and socio-economic equality.

However, while leftist politics are held as a defining facet of the progressive movement in both India and Pakistan, in the case of the Pakistani PWA communism and leftist leanings are also seen as the reason for the movement's eventual downfall. Malik Hafeez describes the threat

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<sup>12</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1988): 189-224.

<sup>13</sup> Kamran Asdar Ali, "Communists in a Muslim Land: Cultural Debates in Pakistan's Early Years," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 504.

that the PWA and its Marxist politics posed to the Pakistani political establishment, which led to various crackdowns from the state to stop its activities, as the establishment attempted to define Pakistan as a nation-state tied to the global capitalist order.<sup>14</sup> The external pressure on the progressive movement was coupled with the hardline “uncompromising stand against those writers who deviated from the official literary doctrine,”<sup>15</sup> leading to internal tensions and cracks within the group which further contributed to the Pakistani Progressive Movement’s demise.

### **The PWA and the Subaltern**

The debate regarding the success of the movement in garnering mass appeal among the subaltern and lower classes is another theme emphasized in the scholarship on the PWA. However, while scholarship asserts that the PWA was a movement for the common man that presented a political message that attempted to cut across class lines,<sup>16</sup> it largely overlooks the background and the status of many of the writers in the Association. Few scholars, such as Baer, point out that while the PWA members wrote in various Indian vernaculars to strive for mass appeal and were seemingly committed to assisting those marginalized by society, their main audience was not the lower classes, but those which the PWA “imagined as being above the level of subaltern.”<sup>17</sup> He argues further that the PWA aimed to create a “popular culture” that would help inspire the lower echelons of society, and emphasized the use of regional Indian languages “as the instrument with which imaginatively to reach” common people, but they themselves were not interested in participating in the egalitarian project.<sup>18</sup> Although informed by socialist and

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<sup>14</sup> Hafeez Malik, "The Marxist literary movement in India and Pakistan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 4 (1967): 662.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 661.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed Ali and N. M. Rashed, "The Progressive Writers' Movement in Its Historical Perspective," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 13, no.14 (1977): 91-97.

<sup>17</sup> Baer, "Shit Writing," 584-85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 586.

Marxist thought, which spurred them to mobilize the marginalized and the economically disadvantaged, PWA literature remained highly exclusive and only catered to an elite few. Only few scholars point out that the main audience and readership of the PWA writers largely consisted of elite Indian men, many of whom were unaffected by the issues of class and gender discrimination.

Most of the scholarship downplays the elitism of the movement by not highlighting the significance of the prosperous backgrounds of the PWA writers themselves. There is little acknowledgment that Zahir and Ahmed, the Association's founders, were educated at Oxford and that their economic privilege and interactions within circles of other Indian elites in London allowed them to be drawn to and develop a left-wing political consciousness. Even in the case of the women involved in the movement, the scholarship does not address the issue of the relative economic privilege of their backgrounds. While touting Rashid Jahan as the representative of female empowerment, by eliding her elite background – as a well-educated doctor belonging to a prominent and wealthy Muslim family – scholarship essentially erases and fails to make note of the fact that it was her access to education and class privilege that provided her the space to publish her critiques on Indian society.

### **The PWA on Gender**

In addition, the scholarship emphasizes the PWA's view on the gender imbalance within society and its critique of the downtrodden position of women in Indian society. As Mahmud states, the writers exposed “the enclosed and oppressive world of Muslim women enslaved to their husbands' demands and outworn religious and social dogmas.”<sup>19</sup> The scholarship especially

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<sup>19</sup> Mahmud, “Angare,” 447.

focuses on the work of Rashid Jahan, the lone woman among the founders of the PWA and only female writer featured in *Angarey*. Shadab Bano's article is exemplary of the importance given to Jahan's writing, detailing how she vehemently attacked practices such as the *purdah* (veiling) and the respectability politics of elite and middle class Muslims in India.<sup>20</sup> According to Bano, Jahan's frank portrayals of the lives of Muslim women attacked "the outmoded social and religious customs" of the Muslim community,<sup>22</sup> which held many women back and relegated them to the private sphere.

However, while this scholarship seeks to highlight the significant and important contributions that Jahan made to the progressive movement, it often treats and tokenizes her as a singular case. She is described as "exceptional for her times"<sup>23</sup> in her ability to articulate progressive political critiques in her literary work, and break with the norm of female Indian writers, who offered moderate debates in female-only publications. The scholarly literature only addresses Jahan when speaking of the plight of Indian women,<sup>24</sup> and seldom places her in context of the PWA's socio-political and economic aspirations. Moreover, it offers little exploration or mention of her background, education, and ideological or political views. In comparison, the scholarship has much more to say about her male counterparts, such as Sajjad Zahir and Ahmed Ali, as well as their politics and contributions, even in the discussions of women's issues.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, beyond the contributions of Rashid Jahan, the scholarly

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<sup>20</sup> Shadab Bano, "Rashid Jahan's Writings: Resistance and Challenging Boundaries, *Angaare and Onwards*," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012): 57-71.

<sup>21</sup> Related Reading: Munawar Iqbal Ahmad and Muhammad Sheeraz, "Of taboos and sacredness: Social realism in Pakistani short story genre," *Academic Research International* 4, no. 2 (2013): 286.

<sup>22</sup> Bano, "Rashid Jahan's Writings," 59.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See also, Sarat Kumar Jena, "The Progressive Nation: Identity of Muslim 'Zanaanaah' in Ishmat Chughtai's *Lihaf*," *Challenge* 22, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>25</sup> For reference: Aziz Ahmad, "Cultural and intellectual trends in Pakistan," *The Middle East Journal* (1965): 35-44.

literature on the Progressive Writers' Association seldom mentions the contributions of other women to the progressive movement or the leftist movement in South Asia, even though Jahan's legacy was continued by other women writers who dealt with a variety of political and social issues in their writings.<sup>26</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, while the scholarship on the Progressive Writers' Association covers much of the major achievements, ideologies, and contradictions of the leftist literary group, the main focus of it remains on fitting the PWA into a broader national and global historical narrative as well as articulating the overarching ideology and politics that informed the Association's writers. While a general consensus exists on the influence of global trends such as the rise of socialism and Marxist theory as well as anti-colonial nationalism on the movement, the scholarship does little to acknowledge the shortcomings of the organization in regards to its insular view of gender and the role that women played in the movement.

For all the thoroughness with which it describes the politics and ideologies of the movement, the scholarship largely overlooks the contributions that women writers made to the movement in both the colonial and post-colonial era. While women were active members of the nationalist movement and in the Urdu literary scene, mention of women's contributions beyond that of Rashid Jahan – who is presented as an exception to most Indian women – is often erased in the scholarly narrative of progressive activism and writing. Moreover, the scholarship does little explore the gendered dynamics within the PWA and the progressive movement at large.

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<sup>26</sup> Kanika Batra, "The Home, The Veil and the World: Reading Ismat Chughtai Towards a 'Progressive' History of the Indian Women's Movement." *feminist review* 95, no. 1 (2010): 27-44.

In the following chapters, I attempt to rectify this lacuna in the scholarship by focusing further on Rashid Jahan's life and writings to highlight her literary contributions beyond the realm of purely women's history or feminism. I argue that Jahan was the only writer of the core PWA leadership who transcended the ideological restraints of her elite upbringing and by using 'women's issues' as a foundational framework within which to discuss and critique colonialism, elitism, and forced religiosity, Jahan provided an egalitarian and accessible literature for the masses. In addition, I will analyze the writing of Qurratulain Hyder, whose life spans the 1947 divide and helps us understand the transition of the movement from colonial to postcolonial South Asia. I will highlight her radical feminist critique of the post-partition nation-state and also illustrate how her career trajectory highlights the issues within the Pakistani PWA which led to its decline. Through an exploration of the writings and career trajectories of these women, I argue that beyond offering radical critiques of gender and female disenfranchisement, their literary careers reflect the true radical politics of the progressive movement in ways that their male counterparts' writings were seldom able to embody.

## Chapter One: The Progressive Writers' Movement

The All-India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) was founded in 1936 following the controversy and uproar stirred by the publishing of *Angarey*, an Urdu short story anthology by a group of progressive Muslim writers that attacked many of the conservative norms of elite Muslim culture and Indian society at large.<sup>27</sup> The anthology was meant as an act of youthful rebellion that defied all prevailing stylistic and contextual norms of Urdu literature, but led to the founding of one of South Asia's most forward thinking literary organizations in the wake of the backlash that its publication provoked. Through this literary association, its founders aimed to bring like-minded intellectuals together to create a space for the articulation of ideas of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and egalitarianism. Most notably, the PWA soon emerged as a space for the flourishing of radical left-wing politics in South Asia, and though the members of the group employed various means and rhetoric to spread its message of egalitarianism, a radical left wing worldview remained at the core of the movement throughout its existence. Leftist ideologies such as Marxism not only provided the foundation for inception of the PWA, but also informed the literary output of its most notable members and ultimately served as the reason for its decline.

### Origins

The city of Lucknow emerged as an intellectual and cultural hub during colonial rule and attracted many artists, activists, and writers. Among them were the young, radical Muslim intellectuals Sajjad Zahir, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan, and Mahmuduzzafar. With all four writers hailing from elite Muslim families, they were a part of the emerging educated classes, well-versed in Western literature and political ideologies such as Marxism due to their access to the

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<sup>27</sup> Sajjad Zahir, *Angarey: 9 Stories and a Play* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014).

English language and western education. Mingling in the same intellectual circles of Lucknow, all four writers came together and connected due to their shared political beliefs which centered around anti-imperialism, secularism, and Marxism. The group of was among the generation of writers that viewed literature as a powerful tool for change that could transform society. The consolidation of the group's shared political and intellectual beliefs came to a head with the 1932 publication of *Angarey*, which critiqued all that the rebellious writers saw as being wrong with Indian society, from colonial suppression and forced religiosity to misogyny.

Funded by Sajjad Zahir and published by Nizami Press in Lucknow, the publication of *Angarey* served as a major catalyst for shaking up Urdu literature, which up until that point had heavily focused on exploration of fantasy and the mystical.<sup>28</sup> With the publication of the anthology, Urdu literature took a turn towards introspection and social realism which aimed to shed light on the various social and political ills that plagued Indian society. The social realism that the young writers (colloquially known as the *Angarey* group) took on was, according to Karline McLain, inspired by "Soviet communism, international Marxism, and the need to respond critically and in a denunciatory fashion to the various mechanisms of repression and the frustration of personal and collective aspirations."<sup>29</sup> As such, throughout their short stories, the progressive writers aimed to address a broad variety of issues that plagued Indian society at the time, such as poverty, conservative thought, and forced religiosity. The brutal yet introspective storytelling condemned elitism, sexual violence, and labor exploitation, specifically in the context of elite Muslim culture, in a way that had never been done before. The young writers

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<sup>28</sup> Sajjad Zahir, *The Light: A History of the Movement for Progressive Literature in the Indo-Pak Subcontinent*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Karline McLain, "The Fantastic as Frontier: Realism, the Fantastic, and Transgression in Mid-Twentieth Century Urdu Fiction," *The Annals of Urdu Studies* 16 (2001): 141.

broke with cultural norms and spoke freely and frankly of taboo topics including sex, prostitution, and even women's health.

However, the provocations of *Angarey's* stories were not without consequence. Soon after its publication, the book saw sharp condemnation and attacks. While the colonial government initially found the anthology to be little more than a mild annoyance, members of Indian civil society were outraged at what they deemed the blasphemous vulgarity of the stories, which openly mocked religion, spoke of taboo topics, and were seen as altogether indecent and immoral. And though the colonial government was initially indifferent to the content of the stories or the book's proliferation, the uproar that *Angarey* caused among many religious and conservative intellectual and political groups resulted in quick action to prohibit it. Thus only a few months after its publication, the book was banned by the Government of the United Provinces on 15 March, 1933 under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code which deemed the book as malicious and offensive to Muslim religious sensibilities.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond an outlawing of the book by the government, civil society also waged an attack on the writers of the *Angarey* group. Publications such as *Medinah* and *The Hindustan Times* published scathing denunciations of the writers and their book, characterizing them as immoral, blasphemous, and a product of the "modernity" that the colonial state was forcing upon Indian society which would corrupt it morally.<sup>31</sup> The backlash and anger against the writers grew to the point where religious leaders issued *fatwas* against the writers and political groups even called for corporal punishments such as stoning and the death penalty. Though the backlash was intense, certain moderate publications, such as the Urdu newspapers *Payam* and *Sarguzasht*,

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<sup>30</sup> Maleiha Malik, "Speech Control," *Index on Censorship* 36, no. 4 (2007), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Shabana Mahmud, "Angāre and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association," *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume no. 2 (1996), 448.

praised the book for its bold stances and the writers' bravery and willingness to point out flaws that exist within Indian society.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than backing down at the continuing frenzy around *Angarey*, the group decided to offer a rebuttal to the many accusations leveled against them and properly articulate and defend their views. Sajjad Zahir, Ahmed Ali, Mahmudzafer, and Rashid Jahan recognized that the means to most effectively counter the accusation against them was through the formation of an association or unified group. Thus, the young left-wing writers came together to form the PWA.<sup>33</sup> While the idea of the association was first brought up by Sajjad Zahir and the other left-wing writers while in London in 1935, the authors organized the first proper conference for the literary collective in Kolkata in 1936, where they formally put forth the organization's manifesto. At the conference the writers responded to the allegations leveled against them and outlined their stances, adherence to left-wing politics, the necessity of social realism, anti-imperialism, and socio-economic equality.<sup>34</sup>

Though founded in response to the local conservative backlash, the reason for the association's inception fit into the broader trend of the emergence of leftist literary collectives in the twentieth century. In 1933, the Soviet Union called for the establishment of a Union of Soviet Writers which would serve as a group for the promotion of the Soviet Union's politics.<sup>35</sup> Though a state-sanctioned entity, the formation of the Union of Soviet Writers allowed for a collection of like-minded intellectuals and writers that exercised freedom in the articulation of their political ideology and engaged in a critique of governance, society, and recent trends in literature.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>34</sup> V. Ramakrishna, "Literary and Theatre Movements in Colonial Andhra: Struggle for Left Ideological Legitimacy," *Social Scientist* (1993), 75.

<sup>35</sup> John Gordon and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union*, (IB Tauris, 1990), 2.

Through this literary group, the Soviet Union not only worked to promote the motives and norms of its own politics and culture, but also provided a template for other leftist intellectual movements throughout the world.<sup>36</sup>

The All-India PWA was among one of the first examples of the Soviet impact on global literature. Its founding members had become politically engaged and devoted communists that were inspired by the Soviet Union, aligning the group with the anti-colonial and nationalist aspirations articulated by the Communist Party of India. And since the *Angarey* group was largely focused on literature that was heavily influenced by leftist politics, it saw the establishment of a literary association as a natural progression in following in the footsteps of the many Soviet intellectuals that they admired such as Vladimir Lenin and Maxim Gorky. The leftist influence on the organization became clear from the outset when at the first All-India Progressive Writers' Conference, the founding members of the PWA issued the association's manifesto which made explicit its political leanings. Like their Soviet counterparts, the Indian progressives saw literature as a powerful tool for social change that needed to be "taken back" from the elite classes and deployed as a looking glass to reflect the prevalence of issues such as conservatism, class warfare, and political subjugation within India.<sup>37</sup>

With the PWA coming to be seen as an Urdu dominated – and thus Muslim dominated – space, many Hindi writers initially held back from joining the association or attending any of its conferences. However, with rising nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment in India, many moderates and non-Muslims came to join the association. Furthermore, with the growing influence of Gandhian philosophy and politics in the 1930s, many writers were drawn towards the PWA, since it espoused a message of socio-economic equality, divorced itself from elitism,

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<sup>36</sup> Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement," 649.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

and gave attention to the rural and peasant classes. This led many prominent non-Muslim and politically moderate writers to join the literary movement. Prominent examples of the diverse group of individuals that became association members included the prominent writer Munshi Prem Chand, who while not a Marxist, was deeply sympathetic to peasants and the poor and joined the PWA because of its focus on the subaltern.<sup>38</sup> Its politics and transcendence of political and communal divides thus made the PWA an organization at the forefront of the nationalist literary movement in South Asia.

### **Critique of Imperialism and Colonialism**

With radical leftist politics as its ideological driving force, the PWA critiqued societal ills on all levels. Initially, however, their arguments were most often deployed specifically as a means of critiquing British colonialism and its effects on India and throughout the rest of the colonized world.<sup>39</sup> For the progressives, their vision of the Indian nation was that of an egalitarian, just, pluralistic, and self-sufficient society, and one free of foreign intervention and political and economic subjugation. The anti-imperialist stance of the PWA was made clear from the outset, with its manifesto resolutions explicitly denouncing acts of imperial aggression such as Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia, Japanese aggression towards China, and ongoing British colonialism in India and abroad.<sup>40</sup> Along with this, most progressive writers' made their view explicit with their blistering critiques of colonial rule which specifically stemmed from anger at British foreign policy.

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<sup>38</sup> Carlo Coppola, "Premchand's Address to the First Meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers Association: Some Speculations," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 21.

<sup>39</sup> Kamran Asdar Ali, "Communists in a Muslim Land: Cultural Debates in Pakistan's Early Years," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 502.

<sup>40</sup> Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement," 651

Firmly anti-imperial in their worldview, and with a majority of the progressive writers following the turns of official Soviet policy,<sup>41</sup> they remained opposed to British and European intervention in regional or international conflicts and they readily lambasted British foreign policy. They viewed it as little more than an extension of imperialism, and as colonized people, the progressives remained deeply sympathetic to the plight of the native populations that would be subjugated as a result of British foreign policy. Beyond maintaining this as a broader ideological stance, the PWA's critique of colonial rule and foreign intervention was specifically directed at the role that India inadvertently played in these conflicts since in many instances, it was Indian troops that would be deployed to resolve international conflicts. Finding that Indians were implicating themselves in conflicts that they themselves had little to do with, the progressive writers expressed anger at their lack of agency within the edifice of colonialism. They also found the mistreatment of Indian troops, along with the various paternalistic colonial laws at home, discriminatory, viewing them as "racial antagonism,"<sup>42</sup> that stifled the Indian right to self-determination.

Along with this, the progressive critique of British rule was anchored in exposing the economic violence of colonialism. Since the aim of aiding the proletariat and envisioning an egalitarian society was at the heart of the PWA, the writings of its members often underlined colonial exploitation, both of natural resources and labor, as one of the greatest issues plaguing Indian society.<sup>43</sup> These critiques of colonial rule made the PWA attractive to a wide range of intellectuals, many of whom often did not necessarily ally with the left or agree with all of the association's stances.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 654.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 651.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 654.

## Critique of Indian Culture

Although many literary works by progressive writers were dedicated to discussions of the political and economic violence of colonialism, the progressives were equally, in not more, critical of what they saw as the many shortcomings of Indian culture. Following the example of Soviet writers, various progressives began to focus on the masses rather than the elite and took aim at the hypocrisies and issues within Indian society.<sup>44</sup> Discussions of the issues of class division and economic inequality were not relegated to critiques of the colonial government solely and members of the PWA were highly critical of its manifestations within Indian culture as well. Their astute critique of Indian life was apparent from the outset, with the Association's manifesto stating that it was the job of the organization to develop an attitude of literary criticism which will deal with "basic problems of our existence today – the problems of hunger and poverty."<sup>45</sup> While a majority of the PWA writers hailed from elite backgrounds, they made a point to make their literature accessible to the masses and to incorporate critiques of class division and economic exploitation in their works.

This was apparent in the works of various progressive writers, including Sajjad Zahir, whose story "A Summer's Evening," shed light on elitism and issues that plague the poor in Indian society.<sup>46</sup> The story is told through the perspective of Munshi Barkat Ali, an upper middle-class office worker, and highlights his attitudes towards those working under him. By detailing his tense interaction with the office clerk, Lalaji, who asks to borrow money to pay his rent, Zahir illustrates a scene where the rich Munshi Barkat Ali maintains an elitist and apathetic attitude and refuses to help an individual in need. Through these characterizations, Zahir presents

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<sup>44</sup> McLain, "The Fantastic as Frontier," 142.

<sup>45</sup> Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement," 651.

<sup>46</sup> Sajjad Zahir, "A Summer's Evening" in *Angarey: 9 Short Stories and a Play* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014), 9-14.

the stark contrast between the attitudes of the rich and the poor and sheds light on how Indians themselves often worked actively to disenfranchise those in need rather than maintain a united front in the face of colonial oppression. As such, the works of various progressive writers argued that while colonialism had created massive economic dislocations in India, it was often the native populations themselves that exacerbated the inequities.

### **Religion and Religiosity**

An early debate that arose in the PWA ranks was that regarding religion. It featured as a prominent theme in the writings of many progressives, often when dealing with issues of forced religiosity, self-righteousness, and superstitions; however, religion's role in the political workings of the PWA was less prominent. While some members of the PWA wanted an alignment of the association with the emerging Muslim nationalist movement, the leadership of the group wanted to be seen as an unbiased institution and thus adopted a secular stance. In its early years, although many of its writers emerged from elite Muslim households, for an overwhelming majority of PWA members, the idea of what Ben Conisbee Baer describes as a "secular nationalist consciousness" took precedence over direct support or affiliation with religious nationalism and politics.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, the communists within the PWA leadership, such as Rashid Jahan and Sajjad Zahir, saw Islam as incompatible with their worldview since they viewed religion as a force that would reinforce the class divide and thus it could not be a system around which society could be organized following independence from colonial rule.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately this led to a break with the Muslim nationalist section of its early membership, who went on to join other rival

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<sup>47</sup> Ben Conisbee Baer, "Shit Writing: Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, the Image of Gandhi, and the Progressive Writers' Association," *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 3 (2009): 584.

<sup>48</sup> Asdar Ali, "Communists in a Muslim Homeland," 518.

movements such as the conservative Muslim nationalist group, Harqa-Arbab-e-Zauq.<sup>49</sup> With this early ideological dilemma behind it, the PWA throughout the late colonial era maintained a decidedly secular worldview, with collective class struggle, notions of universalism, and engaging with the subaltern – regardless of religious identity – taking precedence over communalism and religious nationalism.

While radical politics embraced by the progressive movement allowed for PWA members to substantiate their socio-political stances, their radicalism also worked to highlight the emerging communal attitudes within social and even intellectual circles in India. With the organization largely attracting Urdu language writers, the PWA membership came to reflect the divisions that were starting to emerge in India in the lead up to partition, especially between Urdu and Hindi as “official languages” of India and the emerging movements to consolidate the respective ancient heritages and national aspirations of both.<sup>50</sup> Seeing the dominance of Urdu in the PWA led many Hindi writers to view the association as being aligned with the emerging Muslim nationalist movement, making them suspicious that if they were to join, their politics and concerns would not be addressed by the movement.

The PWA’s alignment with the Communist Party of India (CPI) allowed, in part, a quelling of these tensions. Founding members of the organization were devoted communists and highly active members of the CPI, which endorsed the movement seeing as it not only had overlapping membership but also because the organizations shared much of the same political ideology and socio-economic values. The literary collective’s enthusiastic and visible embrace of leftist politics also helped put Hindi writers at ease, as it further illustrated to them that the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>50</sup> Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement," 652; McLain, "The Fantastic as Frontier," 141.

organization was devoted largely to socio-economic struggles on a collective scale rather than one based on communal differences.<sup>51</sup>

### **Divisions**

Though initially the Progressive Writers' Association's alignment with the Communist Party of India had allowed for the group to gain prominence amongst various intellectual circles that would have otherwise been off put by its political or supposed religious stances, as independence and partition grew close, this alignment sowed division within the organization. The CPI had initially served as a unifying force for the various individuals involved in the organization and presented, according to Kamran Asdar Ali, a "united front politics that sought to bring together all anti-imperialist sections of society,"<sup>52</sup> but the party soon shifted its stance to supporting all movements for self-determination within India, including the Pakistan movement led by the All India Muslim League. While continuing to maintain a secular stance, in the 1940s prominent communist PWA writers, such as Sajjad Zahir and Faiz Ahmad Faiz, started to argue that the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan was logical and a justified expression of the Muslim community's emerging political consciousness.

Sensing the growing communal tensions and possibility of violence, but remaining ambiguous regarding the role of religion in influencing their politics, the PWA leadership argued that the Indian Muslims' right to self-determination justified the call for Pakistan and secession from India.<sup>53</sup> This shift on one of the most salient political debates of the late-colonial period along the lines of the CPI weakened the credibility of the PWA and alienated many among its membership. This switched position especially alienated many of the non-Muslim writers of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 652.

<sup>52</sup> Asdar Ali, "Communists in a Muslim Homeland," 507.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 508.

progressive movement, who saw this as a confirmation of their earlier suspicion of the organization's communal bias and their alignment with Muslim nationalism.

### **The Movement in Postcolonial South Asia**

Following the partition of colonial India in 1947, the PWA was also divided down the India-Pakistan national lines. In postcolonial India, although the association continued, it saw a significant loss in influence and membership due to the backlash and bias that developed around Urdu. With Hindi being adopted as the official language of India, the significant patronage that Urdu had previously from the government, intellectual circles, and even private institutions declined. As Hafeez Malik states, "the position of Urdu also became precarious as the number of readers fluent in Urdu began to decrease" as a result of partition and migration to Pakistan.<sup>54</sup> This national subordination of Urdu resulted in many significant financial issues for the PWA, since a majority of its members were Urdu writers.

Furthermore, the Indian PWA was challenged as the authority on Urdu literature and social realism by various newly emergent literary movements.<sup>55</sup> Along with this, by the 1960s, Urdu writers in India returned to introspection and abandoned social realism in favor of the fantastic as a means of questioning social realities. As a result of these shifts, many Urdu writers involved with the PWA began to retreat from viewing literature as a vehicle for radical social reform and abandoned the PWA. Ultimately though the Indian PWA's politics posed little challenge to its existence in the country, the combined effects of linguistic bias as well as logistical and financial factors contributed to the literary collective's decline in significance, as its publication and literary options, and membership became increasingly grim.

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<sup>54</sup>Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement," 558.

<sup>55</sup> McLain, "The Fantastic as Frontier," 143.

The radicalism of the progressive movement, while one of its most distinctive and appealing features during the colonial period, in some ways came to be its downfall in Pakistan. Unlike in India, in the early years the work of progressive writers saw a vibrant environment and enthusiasm from various publishers and patrons in Pakistan. However, for the All-Pakistan PWA, the main challenge to its continuation came as a result of its radical politics. The All-Pakistan PWA followed the same political line that the All-India PWA had adopted by aligning with the CPI, and soon came to be closely associated with the newly formed Communist Party of Pakistan. Keen to see the leftist movement flourish in Pakistan, Sajjad Zahir migrated to Pakistan and became a founding member of the country's PWA and the secretary general of the Communist Party of Pakistan.<sup>56</sup>

While in colonial India the PWA had initially been open to all individuals that broadly agreed with its message of egalitarianism, in later years it had necessitated a demand for ideological conformity.<sup>57</sup> The Pakistani PWA soon started purging from within its ranks writers that Zahir and other party leaders considered “non-progressives,”<sup>58</sup> severely criticizing centrists and conservatives, which included writers such as Sadaat Hasan Manto and Qurratulain Hyder. Along with this, under Zahir the Pakistani PWA also stressed the need for adherence to a hardline Marxist ideology as well as disavowal from anything “obscene.” Many of the writers deemed “non-progressive” by the PWA leadership, such as Manto, wrote stories that openly dealt with themes of sexuality, and because the often overt sexuality in the writings of progressives had been used by critics and the political establishment as a means of delegitimizing the PWA, it started to self-censor and remove from its ranks writers whose works were deemed

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<sup>56</sup> Talat Ahmed, "Writers and generals: Intellectuals and the first Pakistan coup," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 45, no. 1 (2008), 124.

<sup>57</sup> McLain, "The Fantastic as Frontier," 144.

<sup>58</sup> Asdar Ali, "Communists in a Muslim Homeland", 516.

perverted. The growing chasm between the writers within the Pakistani PWA led to not only a loss in membership for the organization, but also a general decline in the literary collective's influence, as it lost much of the patronage and financial backing that it had enjoyed earlier.

Along with internal issues, the political radicalism of the PWA also made it a target of the Pakistani government, which saw it as a threat to Pakistan's integration into the broader capitalist and liberal world order. With the political elite of Pakistan being suspicious of any "challenge to its ruling authority,"<sup>59</sup> the PWA and the Communist Party of Pakistan were banned in 1951 and 1954, respectively. Since many members of the PWA were known communists and political activists, they were jailed on numerous occasions and often characterized as being anti-Pakistan, anti-Muslim, and treasonous. The Pakistani PWA's radical politics and revolutionary rhetoric, which led to infighting, divisions, and a backlash from the state, ultimately resulted in the literary organization's complete decline and retreat from the Pakistani political and literary spheres.

### **Conclusion**

Although the PWA emerged and developed under a complex variety of circumstances, its every incarnation was driven by radical leftist politics. Influenced heavily by the leftist literature and ideology of Soviet intellectuals, the PWA used these ideologies to critique not only the colonial administration, but also facets of traditional and conservative South Asian culture that it saw as being regressive, exploitative, and harmful. Firmly secular and aiming to transcend any religious bias, the PWA emerged as one of the most important institutions for the South Asian Left. By adopting communism and social realism in their writings, members of the PWA made radical assertions about moral corruption, class disparity, and gendered violence within colonial

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 528.

Indian society. Although its radical politics proved important in the colonial period and the tumultuous moments of partition, the progressive movement ultimately declined in relevance in the changing political, linguistic, and economic contexts of India and Pakistan.

Thus, the PWA was at the center of many prominent moments in South Asia's late colonial and early post-colonial history. It exemplified important cultural and political trends of colonial India and its successor states, both in its emergence and eventual decline. And although notable writers such as Sajjad Zahir and Ahmed Ali have emerged as the main representatives of the legacy of the PWA, I contend that it was the understudied members of the movement, in particular Rashid Jahan and Qurratulain Hyder, that truly embodied its ideals, both in terms of the accessibility and egalitarianism of their literary output as well as in critiquing the socio-political conditions of colonial and post-colonial South Asia.

## Chapter Two: Rashid Jahan and the All-India PWA

As the PWA's politics radicalized, many of its members adopted highly politicized rhetoric to highlight the shortcomings of both colonial rule and also of India's own culture and practices. While male writers within the PWA have been most lauded for their work, its female writers made significant contributions to the rich literature of the progressive movement. They readily crafted stories that used the lens of feminism and leftist politics to denounce imperialism at home and abroad as well as various cultural norms that disenfranchised and oppressed the vulnerable, especially women, in Indian society.

This was especially apparent in the works of writers such as Rashid Jahan, one of the contributing writers of *Angarey*, the lone female founding member of the PWA, and a dedicated Marxist. As the only woman to be featured in the anthology, Jahan emerged as the voice most concerned with addressing women's issues and their ongoing disenfranchisement. Although Jahan made many important literary contributions to the progressive movement, she remains largely overlooked, while her male counterparts in the *Angarey* group and PWA are lauded as vanguards of realist Urdu literature. In fact, Jahan was the only writer from the infamous *Angarey* group whose literary output succeeded in reconciling and transcending her elite Muslim background by producing accessible literature that addressed issues of women's health, poverty, and socio-economic liberation.

### **Brief Biography**

Jahan was born in August 1905, to an upper-class liberal Muslim family that was at the forefront of the early twentieth-century intellectual and reformist movements in the Indian Muslim community. Her father, Sheikh Abdullah, was a lawyer who had remained deeply concerned with the education of Muslim women and worked to promote girls' education in the

Muslim community, going so far as to open a girls' school in Aligarh.<sup>60</sup> Along with this, Jahan's family also established *Khatun*, a women's literary journal that discussed various women's issues as well as broader political debates within the Indian Muslim community at the time. Many women from her family became regular contributors to the literary journal and eventually she herself did as well. The literary journal gave Jahan her first taste of writing, impacting not only her interest in education, but also allowing her to articulate and form strong political beliefs regarding social uplift, modernity, and eradicating social ills.<sup>61</sup>

Like her other sisters, with her family's encouragement, Jahan pursued an undergraduate education at the Aligarh girls' school that her father had established, and then went on to receive her medical training and M.B.B.S. degree at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. Upon finishing her education, Jahan went on to become a gynecologist in the provincial medical services, where she lived and travelled in the smaller towns and cities of the United Provinces and became intimately aware of the struggles that poor disenfranchised women faced.<sup>62</sup> However, it was her arrival in Lucknow that truly marked Jahan's political awakening. Having emerged as the cultural capital of Upper India, Lucknow offered various cinema houses, educational institutions, and clubs populated by the new class of educated Indians. It was in this vibrant intellectual environment that Jahan started her medical career at the Lady Dufferin Hospital and came into contact with other young progressives. In Lucknow she met Ahmed Ali, Sajjad Zahir, and Mahmudduzafar, joined the Communist Party of India, and through mingling in leftist intellectual circles, truly engaged with ideas of Marxism that allowed her the theoretical

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<sup>60</sup> Carlo Coppola and Sajida Zubair, "Rashid Jahan: Urdu Literature's First 'Angry Young Woman'," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 22, no. 1 (1987): 167.

<sup>61</sup> Rakhshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>62</sup> Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause*, 2.

framework to understand, according to Rakhshanda Jalil, “many things that struck her as unfair, such as colonialism, imperialism, capitalism” and uneven development.<sup>63</sup> It was in the vibrant intellectual culture of Lucknow that she came to produce her contributions for *Angarey* and many of her other thought-provoking works which addressed a plethora of issues and their effects on women.

### **Gender, Class, and Religion**

While Indian Muslim women had been writing long before Jahan, earlier women’s writing had largely consisted of moderate reformists’ views that only proposed, according to Shadab Bano, “piecemeal changes palatable to the community,”<sup>64</sup> and worked within the value system of the *sharif* (respectable) household, with literature doing little more than entrenching “the norms of respectability for *sharif* women.”<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, through her writings, Jahan directly attacked the outdated values of *sharif* Muslim society, and brought to light the hypocrisy and taboos that were deeply rooted in the culture, yet hardly spoken of, such as female sexuality and health. Jahan’s education, while providing her with the basic tools of literacy, also worked to heavily inform her writing. Unlike many other women at the time, Jahan embraced her education and politics and put her medical training to use in her writing by often pointing to various women’s health issues in her short stories. This was clear in her writing such as, “Behind the Veil: A One-Act Play,” in which, while discussing the marital issues of Mohammadi-Begum, an upper-class Muslim woman, Jahan highlights the problems that women faced in abusive and oppressive marriages.<sup>66</sup> Through the exploration of Mohammadi-Begum’s ill health and marital

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>64</sup> Shadab Bano, "Rashid Jahan's Writings: Resistance and Challenging Boundaries, *Angarey* and Onwards," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012), 59.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Rashid Jahan, “Behind the Veil: A One-Act Play” in *Angarey: 9 Stories and a Play* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014), 83 -101.

strife – both of which were brought on by excessive child-bearing – Jahan highlighted themes seldom discussed in Urdu literature at the time such as women’s sexual health and non-consensual sex.

Bano notes that in the story, “the women speak openly about their bodies, sexual ailments and the effects of repeated childbirth and abortions,”<sup>67</sup> issues which had before then been considered taboo to discuss in a public forum, let alone be published and circulated. In this story, like many of Jahan’s others, the female doctor is presented as the voice of reason. She argues for the Mohammadi-Begum to reject her husband’s wishes for more children and to prescribe to contraception, and put her own health first. Beyond its bold stance on the issue of women’s reproductive health, Jahan’s inclusion of the female doctor in “Behind the Veil” is also a radical statement. The educated female doctor is not only an embodiment of the independent working woman, but also serves as the voice of progress and modernity. The female doctor defies traditional norms that negatively affected women and kept them in positions of subservience, as her education and training allow her not only independence but also a clearer understanding of herself and body. Furthermore, by characterizing Mohammadi-begum as a woman at the complete mercy and wishes of her husband, Jahan creates a juxtaposition between the constricted lives of women who live in *purdah* in the confines of the home and the independence and autonomy that a professional woman holds. This is apparent when Mohammadi-begum tells the doctor “You are much better off. You earn your own money, eat what you want, sleep well at night. Here, whether one is going through heaven or hell, my husband is only concerned with his pleasure!”<sup>68</sup>

Jahan’s writings, beyond just deviating from existence within the *sharif* norms of Indian

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<sup>67</sup> Bano, “Rashid Jahan’s Writings”, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Rashid Jahan, “Behind the Veil: A One-Act Play,” 203.

Muslim culture and actively addressing social taboos, also transcended class boundaries and worked to shed light on the plight of women from all segments of Indian society. While many of her stories focused on the lives of elite women – which Jahan herself was – she made a concerted effort to address the issues of poor women in her writings as well, with many of her short stories featuring women from working class backgrounds. Through these stories, Jahan acknowledged the fact that class and financial situations played heavily into the way that women responded to oppression and aggression from men. Her stories showed awareness of the fact that for upper- and middle-class women, finding their voice and independence was often much easier as they had access to resources, wealth, and education, unlike poorer women who were often unable to cope with the stress of everyday life.

Her observation and characterization of the intersection of poverty and gender is apparent in many of her stories such as “Iftari,” which explored not only the hypocrisy of the Muslim upper-classes, but also the plight of poor women and the violence that they faced at the hands of other women.<sup>69</sup> The story illustrates the relationship between the Begum Sahiba, an upper-class Muslim woman, and her young maid, who she discovers had not been fasting during the holy month of Ramadan and had been eating on the sly. The short story highlights the brutality that the young maid faces at the hands of her self-righteous employer when it is discovered she had not been fasting, and highlights the “mistress-servant” theme,<sup>70</sup> which is apparent in many of Jahan’s writings as it works to show the class divide and the complacency of elite women in perpetuating violence against the vulnerable. Stories such as “Iftari,” while illustrating the hypocrisy and brutality of respectable upper-class families, also brought to light Jahan’s

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<sup>69</sup> Rashid Jahan, “Iftari” in *A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 166-176.

<sup>70</sup> Coppola and Zubair, “Rashid Jahan,” 178.

awareness of the socio-economic position of women and how class went hand in hand with women's oppression. The maid, Nasiba, who was "raised in the family, and had no one in the world except Begum Saheba" is characterized as a helpless woman who has little choice but to face the abuse that her employer throws her way as she is wholly economically dependent upon them.<sup>71</sup> Through the depiction of Nasiba's bleak future and outcomes for escape the story makes a clear point that access to socio-economic power and privilege mattered in the decision women make and that independence was much easier for affluent women. Through Nasiba's character, and the uneven power dynamic between her and her rich employer, it becomes clear that Jahan was in tune with and understanding of the situation that poorer women faced in fighting for their rights and liberation.

Along with highlighting the intersection between gender and class, "Iftari" also sheds light on the attitude that Jahan maintained regarding religion and its role in society. In discussing the rituals of Muslim fasting, the story negatively depicts overtly pious individuals and maligns mullahs as individuals that prey upon the poor and "fleece them of their hard-earned money."<sup>72</sup> The story's meditation on religious hypocrisy characterizes religiosity as a means of exploitation and degradation of the poor and working class, who are often specifically preyed on by religious leaders asking for donation. Her assertion that overtly pious individuals also becomes clear in her description of the money-lending Khans who live in Nasiba's neighborhood. By writings that the Khans "considered themselves to be devout Muslims and very particular about observing fasts and prayers" but also as men that made profit from loan interests (a practice forbidden in Islam) and harassed the neighborhood women, Jahan showed the double standard that exists in muslim

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<sup>71</sup> Rashid Jahan, "Iftari," 167.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 168.

society among the religious elite.<sup>73</sup> By showing seemingly pious individuals as those that partake in sinful activities that they stand to benefit from, the story tears down morally righteous individuals and brings to light the fact that Jahan like many involved in the progressive movement, envisioned society in a more or less secular way and saw religion as a force that is only exploited to sow social divisions and oppress the vulnerable.

Another theme in Jahan's writings is the exploration of the relationship between women and the newly emerging colonial institutions that were aiming to "modernize" India, such as girl's school and clinics. Hailing from an elite liberal family that had been at the forefront of women's education reforms, Jahan pursued academics and trained as a doctor at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. A product of an institution that was set up by the colonial government with the purpose of educating and "modernizing" Indian women, Jahan embraced her education and radical politics to challenge not only the colonial government, but also what she perceived as conservative and oppressive cultural practices that left many in India disenfranchised. Her feminist critiques of both colonial institutions as well as of the ideals of respectability (in relation to female sexuality) are apparent in her story "Woh" (That One), which explores the relationship between Safiya, a middle-class teacher and Who, a prostitute deformed by venereal disease.<sup>74</sup> The story recounts the unlikely friendship between the two women who meet at a lady's clinic, who visit's Safiya at her school everyday, with all the other teachers and administrators left judging and disgusted.

By showing upper-class Safiya's role as a teacher at an all-girls school, the story not only highlighted the ways that colonial institutions emerged to "modernize" Indian women, but also

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>74</sup> Rashid Jahan, "Woh" in *A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 117-120.

shows the role that upper class Indian women played in them, with the *sharif* staffing these institutions and making them “acceptable” or elite social spaces. Furthermore, showing the difference in lifestyle of *sharif* Safiya and the ailing prostitute Woh, Jahan not only exposed the gendered violence of poverty, but also the elitist and hypocritical attitudes found among middle- and upper-class Indians themselves. Though the ailing prostitute came to visit her everyday, Safiya couldn’t help but find “something so repulsive about her appearance.”<sup>75</sup> The fact that Safiya aimed to keep her meeting’s with Woh private to preserve her own reputation and continuously discussed the repulsion she felt towards her stands to represent the moral righteousness that members of the elite upheld. The story ends with Woh being discovered and brutally beaten by a school employee who calls her a “common whore” who comes to the school and “acts like a begum”, while Safiya stands by and watches.<sup>76</sup> Through Safiya’s complicity in Woh’s suffering Jahan makes clear that gender simply did not serve as a common uniting factor in Indian society, and that social morality and class disparity was often at the heart of women’s issues in India.

Beyond an awareness of issues faced by poor Muslim women, Jahan’s writing also addressed the plight of Hindu women. Many of her writings featured inter-religious relations as a means to emphasize the oppression societal patriarchy had on all women regardless of religion, thus pleading not only for, according to Coppola and Zubair, “understanding between religious groups, but also solidarity in sisterhood.”<sup>77</sup> This theme was apparent in many of her stories such as “Mera Ek Safar” which features Hindu and Muslim characters and has a plot that speaks to

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>77</sup> Coppola and Zubair, “Rashid Jahan,” 176.

the necessity of interreligious communication and cooperation.<sup>78</sup> In the story, Jahan recounts the experience of Zubaida, a young educated Muslim woman and her experience of being caught up in a brawl in a woman's train cabin. Through the keen observations of Zubaida, Jahan unpacks the misogyny of Indian culture at large and the role women play in upholding it, all while asking for the end of communal hostilities and sisterhood among Muslim and Hindu women. This is clear in her discussion of "outdated" traditions that women adhere to such as wearing customary ornaments and jewelry such as nose rings. She described the nose ring as impractical and something "some man, fed up with a talkative woman, must have invented so that a woman's voice would remain trapped in her mouth."<sup>79</sup>

By highlighting the impracticality and unnecessary nature of such things and the foolishness of women who turn these inventions into traditions Jahan makes critiques the way that women themselves play into patriarchy. Her discussion of communal divisions and the patriarchal nature of religious practices is brought up when Zubaida states that "every religion teaches that women have feeble minds,"<sup>80</sup> highlighting again her critique of the negative influence of religion on society. By writing of two separate Hindu and Muslim "camps" that start fighting one another over perceived issue of the other's untouchability and uncleanness, Jahan aimed to draw a bridge between defining the collective experience of all women in India, highlighting how in many cases the oppression and discrimination that women faced transcended religious, ethnic, and communal grounds. She not only called for communal peace, but she also became one of the first writers to engage the feminist theme of solidarity that only emerged fully

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<sup>78</sup> Rashid Jahan, "Mera ek Safar" in *A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 132-144.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

in Urdu literature later on.<sup>81</sup>

### **Writing Style**

While all the writers in the *Angarey* group and the Progressive Writers' Association aimed to write for the masses,<sup>82</sup> often times the works of the movement's most celebrated authors remained inaccessible. This was clear in the cases of Ahmed Ali and Sajjad Zahir, who addressed social ills and wrote in the vernaculars, but used highly stylized prose and complicated literary techniques such as stream-of-consciousness.<sup>83</sup> The messages within their critically acclaimed and artistic prose were often lost on the main demographic that they were aiming to reach, and thus their writings continued to be patronized by and accessible to only the educated elites. Meanwhile, Jahan's writing was often disparaged by literary and cultural critics as not up to the par due to the fact that it was written in "simplistic" and dull prose. However, it was precisely her style that made her writing most egalitarian and accessible to individuals in the lower classes, which was the demographic the progressive movement most hoped to target.

The narrative tone throughout much of Jahan's work is colloquial and neutral, with simple prose that lacks any conscious attempts at forced artfulness. Her unpretentious writing style lent itself well to exposure to a broader audience. And her documentary-style prose was also neutral to the point where it could "easily be considered Hindi or Urdu," helping get her message across to a readership beyond the Muslim elite.<sup>84</sup> Along with the simplicity of her prose, her stories were defined by the simplicity of her characters, all of whom represented

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<sup>81</sup> Sarat Kumar, "The Progressive Nation: Identity of Muslim 'Zanaanaah' in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf*," *Challenge* 22, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>82</sup> Ahmed Ali and N. M. Rashed, "The Progressive Writers' Movement in Its Historical Perspective," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 13, no. 1/4 (1977): 91-97.

<sup>83</sup> Carlo Coppola, "Ahmed Ali (1910-1994): Bridges & Links East & West." *Journal of South Asian Literature* (1998): 112-116.

<sup>84</sup> Coppola and Zubair, "Rashid Jahan", 173.

archetypes of both men and women. Although many conservative publications and literary critics often pointed to this as a sign of weakness of her writing skills, it was largely a conscious effort to create easily identifiable “types” within her work, which were recognizable and accessible to a broad readership. Through such seemingly simplistic characterization, Jahan offered readers a means of accessibility to, according to Bartolovich and Lazarus, “insights about female bodies and subjectivities in relation to colonial, modern, traditional, and national institutions,”<sup>85</sup> in a way that broad swaths of Indian society could relate to and understand.

Along with her work crafting accessible pieces of politically charged literature, Rashid Jahan also found other avenues to democratize her works and make them available to a broad audience that encompassed all social and religious backgrounds. Jahan recognized that not even the simplest of short stories could be universally accessible to large swaths of the subaltern classes due to the lack of access to print culture or literacy, and to remedy the situation, along with publishing her writings in various literary journals and magazines, she also wrote various radio and theatre plays throughout her career.<sup>86</sup> During the early days of the progressive movement, she wrote plays such as “Parosi” (neighbors), which were staged by the members of leftist theatres groups such as the Student’s Federation, with which Jahan had also maintained a loose relationship since her days as a student. Along with writing her own play, she also dramatized “Kafan” (shroud), a short story by her fellow PWA writer, Prem Chand, with considerable success.<sup>87</sup> Through these stage productions, Jahan aimed to make progressive ideas even more accessible to the poorer classes and disseminate her message to a broader audience

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<sup>85</sup> Bartolovich and Lazarus, *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, 153.

<sup>86</sup> Gail Minault, "Coming Out: Decisions to Leave Purdah," *India International Centre Quarterly* 23, no. 3/4 (1996), 97.

<sup>87</sup> Coppola and Zubair, “Rashid Jahan”, 171.

than simply the educated and well-read audience that most literary magazines courted. Alongside staging productions of political short stories, Jahan also produced various radio plays during her career. Through her production of various radio adaptations for All-India Radio, Lucknow,<sup>88</sup> Jahan helped spread her messages of socio-economic reform and gender equality to a broader audience, unlike many of the other (male) writers involved with the PWA.

### **Comparison with Male Writers**

A vast majority of the pre-independence PWA writers were devoted Marxists. As such, they anchored much of their writing in addressing themes of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism. One of the primary critiques leveled by many of the prominent members of the progressive movement was against the immorality and violence of colonial rule. As Gopal notes, “Marxist political and literary traditions inevitably subordinated gender to class,”<sup>89</sup> and a majority of the male writers in the movement seldom worked to address the intersection and influence of political and economic factors with gender. This was clear in the approach that many writers took when discussing only the effects that colonialism on the Indian economy or the military – inarguably male-dominated spaces. Rather than discussing the implications of and for gender in the critiques of colonialism, most men in the progressive movement chose to focus on colonial exploitation purely in terms of economics and high politics. Jahan, on the other hand, used her writings to not only critique capitalist colonialism, but to actively highlight the effects that colonial rule had on women in India, who were victimized by both colonialism and patriarchy. Her unique embrace of Marxism and feminism allowed Jahan to present a deep

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Priyamvati Gopal, *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151.

awareness of the gendered violence of colonialism and how it affected Indian women in specific ways that it did not men.

Her criticism of the colonial administration vis-à-vis women come to light in her works such as “A Trip to Delhi,”<sup>90</sup> which recounts the time spent by Mallika-begum, an upper-class Muslim woman, and her husband, in a Delhi train station. In the short story, Jahan’s juxtaposes the majesty and grandeur of the railway system (another institution of the colonial modernizing project) with the humiliation that colonial rule had brought upon India. The story depicts how Mallika-begum was left alone at the train station by her husband who went to chat with friends, and while waiting for him to return, she was gawked at and commented upon by the white men present at the train station. In the story, the demeaning and ostracizing language with which the “wretched” white men asked Mallika-begum to reveal her face, which was shrouded, symbolically represents the relationship between the colonized and colonizer. The power dynamic presented spoke not only of the position of Indian subordination broadly, but of how women were specifically violated and demeaned by colonial rule. The aloof response of the begum’s husband who carried on “twirling his moustache, without a care in the world” in response to her discomfort also pointed to the radical underpinnings of Jahan’s worldview, where all men operating within patriarchy demoralize women, and remain, in many ways, complicit in the oppression and violence of colonialism, and its impact on native women.

Although male writers in the progressive movement, such as Sajjad Zahir, also tackled the issue of misogyny and women’s oppression in Indian society, they often remained restricted and narrow in their approach to women’s issues. For them, women’s issues could only be discussed in the context of improvement within the existing confines of patriarchal society and

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<sup>90</sup> Rashid Jahan, “A Trip to Delhi” in *Angarey: 9 Stories and a Play* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014), 45-51.

the domestic sphere, while ignoring issues of female independence or liberation. This is apparent in stories such as “Dulari” by Sajjad Zahir, which while highlighting the abuse women, especially poor women, faced, did little to focus on the lives of women outside of the sphere of domesticity. The stories by male PWA writers did little to address the ways that education, modernity, and reforms allowed women to engage with the outside world and gain independence and thus fell into the long line of reformist Urdu literature published during the colonial era, which operated within a paternalistic and patriarchal worldview, advocating reforms for women within the private sphere of the home.<sup>91</sup>

In contrast, Jahan’s writings called for a complete restructuring of Indian society free from chauvinistic male-dominance. For instance, while highlighting women’s issues in the domestic sphere, Jahan depicted her female characters as independently engaging with the outside world. Her stories such as “Woh” and “Behind the Veil” featured strong, independent career women whose lives were not dictated by and confined to the politics of the home. Both stories present strong female characters, such as Safiya and the doctor, who are not defined by their relationship to men and chart their own course in life while maintaining a level of social and economic independence. The short story while exploring the relationship between Safiya, a teacher, and the deformed prostitute, Woh, highlighted Jahan’s intersectional and radical approach to understanding the evolving role of women in mid-twentieth century India. Beyond standing as moments of intersection and interaction between different classes and social groups, stories such as “Woh” and “Behind the Veil” highlighted the ways that women engaged with and took advantage of public institutions of ‘modernity’ that were introduced by the colonial administration, such as hospitals and clinics. While acknowledging the immorality of colonial

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<sup>91</sup> Sajjad Zahir, “Dulari” in *Angarey: 9 Stories and a Play* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014), 10-16.

rule, Jahan does however highlight that her characters utilized colonial institutions to escape the oppressive patriarchy and dated customs of their native culture.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, while the progressive movement at large dealt with women's issues and the abuse, struggles, and oppressions that they faced, it was Jahan's works that truly pushed the bounds of traditional conservative society. Through her vociferous attacks on socio-economic elitism, misogyny, and regressive traditional beliefs, Jahan challenged societal norms like no other member of the infamous and influential *Angarey* group. Unlike the male writers in the group, Jahan best managed to reconcile her own elite Muslim background and to transcend the restrictions her own privileged position could have placed on her as a writer. While other progressive writers such as Sajjad Zahir paid lip service to the issues that affected women in India, Jahan's works truly went to the core of women's issues and showed women present and engaged in all spheres of society. Using her education and medical training, Jahan shed light not only the socio-religious restrictions on women, but also the way that these cultural modes were interconnected with issues such as women's health and sexualities. Her writings explored the intersection of class, sexuality, and religion, and presented a nuanced view of how these issues not only affected Muslims and women, but Indian society as a whole. The intelligence, nuance, and provocative nature of Jahan's writing makes clear why she was not only highly influential to the progressive female writers after her, but also why she was the most successful in accomplishing the egalitarian and populist mission of the Progressive Writers' Association, and why her erasure from the movement's history needs to be rectified.

Although Rashid Jahan was a prime example of a PWA writer who embodied the core ideals of the progressive movement – including its focus on egalitarianism – she was far from the

only notable woman within the progressive movement in Urdu literature. Just as Jahan embodied the most progressive ideals of this movement in colonial India, female writers such as Qurratulain Hyder went on to personify the progressive movement in the post-colonial era. Through her writings as well as the trajectory of her career and personal life, Hyder represented the state of the progressive movement in the post-colonial era, mirroring both the movement's successes and failures in this period.

### **Chapter Three: Qurratulain Hyder and the Demise of the PWA**

In her 1959 magnum opus *River of Fire (Aag Ka Darya)*, Qurratulain Hyder weaved together nonlinear narratives, touching on various moments of the Indian subcontinent's history from the early-fourth century to the post-partition era.<sup>92</sup> Through the complex and unconventional narrative and a rejection of mainstream and nationalist teleology and popular historiography, Hyder provided insight into the region's dynamic culture, politics, and history. Beyond surpassing the dated and absolutist narratives of South Asian history, *River* served as an example of a shift in Urdu literature as well. Building on the tradition of social realism and taking the "socially" conscious literary approach, Hyder wove together a complex narrative that addressed the central role of the women in shaping South Asian history and society. Standing as an important figure in the progressive movement, Hyder represented the vision and disillusionment of literary progressives with the nation-state, as her ambivalent career came to embody the waning influence and position of the PWA in post-colonial South Asia.

#### **Brief Biography**

Born in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh in 1927, like many other writers in the Progressive movement Qurratulain Hyder emerged from an upper class Muslim background. Her father, Sajjad Hyder Yaldara, was a prominent civil servant in colonial India and part of the liberal-minded social reform movement. Like Rashid Jahan, she emerged from a family that encouraged women's education and was active in the literary culture of the time. Her father, beyond his career in the civil services, also wrote regularly. Along with this, Hyder's mother was among the many upper class women who took advantage of the proliferation of the various women's journals and periodicals emerging in the early twentieth century and published various notable

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<sup>92</sup> Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire* (New Directions Publishing, 2003).

short stories and serialized novels in periodicals such as *Ismat*. With her family's encouragements, Hyder was educated at Isabella Thorburn College where she studied English literature. Informed by her education as well as her family's liberal politics and literary roots, Hyder developed an interest in writing professionally and eventually joined the PWA as it was the central hub for forward-thinking writers and intellectuals and provided an intellectually stimulating avenue for her to write in.

Following partition in 1947, Hyder, like many other Muslim writers moved with her family to Pakistan and settled in Lahore. It was in Pakistan following her experience migrating and then witnessing partition, that she went on to write her epic *River of Fire*, and gain infamy for her scathing critiques of Indian historiography, partition, and the modern South Asian nation-states.

### **Fictionalizing the Subcontinent's Past**

Heavily inspired by the works of progressive writers, especially Rashid Jahan, Qurratulain Hyder emerged as a prominent female writer in the late 1940s and built on the many themes that had emerged in Urdu literature in previous decades, especially in the writings of Rashid Jahan. Although Jahan's own career was cut short due to cancer, which led to her death in 1952, her critiques of gender discrimination, conservatism, and tolerance set the precedent for various female writers in post-colonial India and Pakistan, with Qurratulain Hyder being chief among them. Hyder deeply admired the work of Jahan and like other female writers such as Ismat Chughtai, saw Jahan as a close mentor and inspiration whose works informed her own writing style and to an extent, her political outlook.

Jahan's inspiration is evident in her approach to the discussion of gender in her writings, most notably in *River of Fire*. Published in Lahore in 1959, the novel, with its non-linear

narrative and complex stylization, became popular among the South Asian intelligentsia. Throughout the novel, as Hyder weaves together centuries of Indian history, she features a strong gendered critique of Indian culture through the stories of the four recurring characters featured in the novel, Gautam, Chumpa, Cyril, and Kamal. She utilizes these four characters throughout the novel Hyder highlights the misogynistic practices that have permeated Indian society at various points in its history rather than just focusing on the oppression and subjugation that women faced at the hands of colonial rule. The novel's themes and characters highlight how the history of the subcontinent was chauvinistic in every time period, and often relegated women as objects without agency, taking them into consideration only in relation to men and their desires. The various characters in her novel represent the many tropes that women have embodied in Indian culture, all of which work to represent, according to Arindam Basu, a "polyphonic critique of misogynic practices of the civilization."<sup>93</sup>

This is apparent in the different ways that the female characters Sujata and Champa are characterized throughout the narrative. Sujata, reemerges at various points throughout the narrative as passive, without agency, and wholly subservient. She fits the mold of what is considered acceptable for women in Indian society. But along with this, she also stands as the victim of the oppression of patriarchy and how it has systematically worked to silence and disenfranchise women through the subcontinent's history. On the other hand, the character Champa represents the stereotype of the "new woman" that stood for harmony, peace, and endurance. In presenting her as the woman most overlooked by the men in her life, Hyder points

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<sup>93</sup> Arindam Basu, "Pratibha Biswas: Qurratulain Hyder's 'Aag ka Dariya'."

to the inherently instable, violent, and war mongering nature of men who seem to view peace and understanding as inconsequential and unimportant forces.

Along with this, one of the main themes woven throughout the different narrative arcs of *River of Fire* is the focus on collective humanity and denouncement of fragmenting identity politics. Hyder presents a story which focuses on the necessity of solidarity and coexistence, rather than communalism and separatism. As the story goes through various periods of South Asian history, there remains a focus on the contributions of different groups to the culture and society of South Asia. The novel builds on every period of Indian history – from ancient Vedic history, Muslim arrival and colonial rule, to partition – but does not privilege any single era as the most defining or traumatic period in the region’s history, as Masood Ashraf Raja argues.<sup>94</sup> The novel rather, builds on the contributions of each era and highlights the ways that the Subcontinent remains a repository of different cultures, absorbing a variety of groups to form a unique hybrid culture. But while steering far from absolving colonialism of the violence it perpetuated, the novel also steers clear of romanticizing any other era of Indian history as the “ideal” or best time in the history of the region.

### **Critiquing the State**

Veering away from the themes of history, in line with her progressive political beliefs, Hyder uses her novel as avenue for critique of the state and the broader ideas of India and Pakistan as individual and distinct nation-states. While most other writers in the progressive movement had strongly remained anti-imperialist, their stances on partition and the directions taken on by the newly-independent nation states had been varied and largely ambivalent,

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<sup>94</sup> Masood Ashraf Raja, "Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*: The Novel and the Politics of Writing beyond the Nation-State'," *Interactions* 15, no. 2 (2006): 50.

focusing only on secularism and Marxist governance. While others had written extensively and explicitly on the trauma of partition and its aftermath, Hyder used *River* as an avenue to offer a subtle critique of the psychological and political effects of independence. In the last section of the novel, which focuses on the post-partition era, Hyder uses familial connections as a metaphorical representation of the nation and critiques the artificiality of it. Published at a time when Urdu literature had started to take a more nationalistic turn and where religion had emerged as a means of articulating and justifying separatism, the book draws on the mythology of South Asia to point to the common interests and cultural commonalities of the subcontinent's Muslims and Hindus.<sup>95</sup>

While most other literature produced at the time aimed to present a graphic account of the trauma of partition violence by capturing, according to Raja, the object of the violence “in the very moment of its violation,”<sup>96</sup> Hyder provides a seemingly detached view of the event. By centering her story around a group of characters in the diverse city of Lucknow, *River* shows the effects that partition had on the lives and psyches of characters who were invested in and believed in the idea of a pluralist and united nationalism. It features individuals that were caught in the middle of a nationalist divide and born into a political reality which was at odds with their idea of a united India. Through this story Hyder offers her vision of post-colonial India as one based in common humanity and secular humanism rather than the nationalist separatism which led to partition and a divided South Asia.

In the novel Hyder makes a point to emphasize the fact that South Asian culture is an amalgamation of a variety of languages, rituals, and practices that bind the collective together.

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<sup>95</sup> Omar Qureshi, "Twentieth-century Urdu literature," *Handbook of Twentieth Century Literatures of India* (1996), 23.

<sup>96</sup> Raja, "Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*," 51.

She rebukes the idea that it was the inherent cultural differences between Hindus and Muslims that made co-existence impossible and partition inevitable, not only through the descriptions of characters but also through imagining physical spaces. In the novel Hyder states that Pakistanis in many cases “you will find a very ardent and patriotic Pakistani remarking casually that he or she is going ‘home’” when speaking of visiting India.<sup>97</sup> Through the inclusion of such passages in *River of Fire* Hyder asserts the inherent artificiality of the idea of the modern nation-state, and especially that of Pakistan. Though created as the homeland for the subcontinent’s Muslims, many still continue to maintain a deep connection to places across the border in India, so much so that they believe that to be their home. This asserts the arbitrary notion of the borders which divide the people of the subcontinent and comes to assert that it was pre-partition India that was the “true” India which has now been disrupted and divided.

Hyder’s critique of the nation-state is also made clear in her portrayal of the life of the character Champa in independent India. Champa, though an elite Muslim, had decided to stay behind in India believing it to be her home and yet because of her religion is still seen as an individual intrinsically connected to Pakistan and thus “othered” by the Hindu majority within India. This motif is apparent in the novel when she is confronted by a young Bengali Indian who asks her “Hello there! How is Mr. Jinnah? How is it that he has gone away to Karachi and left you behind?”<sup>98</sup> By presenting this interaction which leaves Champa saddened and confused, Hyder’s distills her critique of the independent nation-state as a source for aggravation of communal tensions. Though India touted itself as a democratic society based in pluralism, the communal divisions still continue. The Muslims of the subcontinent are seen as an inherent other and a foreign group even within India and are seen as belonging to Pakistan purely on the basis

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<sup>97</sup> Hyder, *River of Fire*, 374.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

of their religion. By presenting such dynamics Hyder asserts that partition and the new nation state has introduced a national consciousness that has led to a break in the co-existence and mixing of cultures that had previously existed in the subcontinent.

Along with critiquing the nation-state as a factor which has fuelled communalism and religious tensions, Hyder also presents a gendered critique of the nation state by positing it as a male-dominated space. This is clear in the inclusion of passages in the novel where the migration of men to Pakistan is that is described “fresh new interest in life: a brand new country, promotions, greater opportunities and challenges. Men have an entirely separate world.”<sup>99</sup> In doing so, Hyder asserts that it is men that had more mobility and advantages to take from their potential move to Pakistan as the patriarchal society and culture of South Asia would give them socio-economic advantaged that women could not achieve. Furthermore, by juxtaposing this with women’s experience of partition and migration, which is described as isolating and violent, it is clear that Hyder asserts women experience of partition to be different to that of men because they were the one’s from whom partition was a dangerous journey during which they could fall victims to violence, rape, and murder. Hyder asserts that men easily looked back on the past because for men “there was no fear of partition.”<sup>100</sup>

### **Hyder and the Pakistani PWA**

Since Hyder was part of the exodus of Urdu language writers and progressives who migrated to Pakistan following Indian independence, her career trajectory as a writer there came to represent that of the progressive movement within Pakistan. As a fledgling state founded as the homeland for the subcontinent’s Muslims, Pakistan set out on a project of defining itself and its position in the world. Writers came to play a major role in this project of building a collective

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 305.

national culture and identity for Pakistan, with Urdu literature focusing not only on themes of post-partition trauma, but soon also on nationalism. While various groups emerged that represented various visions for Pakistan, the Pakistani off-shoot of the PWA soon arose as the organization aiming to represent the interests of the secular left in Pakistan. Though the leadership of the PWA had ultimately come to support the idea of Pakistan by characterizing it as a natural progression of the Indian Muslim minority's political awakening and aspirations, it maintained its secular leaning in post-partition. Soon, however, the group succumbed to challenges posed to its existence by the Pakistani political establishment as well as issues within its own leadership.

In the post-colonial era, Pakistan inherited many of the restrictive laws imposed by the colonial government, which actively curtailed press freedom and public discourse around issues that it considered divisive and seditious. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League and “founder” of Pakistan, himself advocated for press freedom, but his death soon after the founding of Pakistan left the much more conservative and restrictive political establishment in charge of the fledgling state.<sup>101</sup> The Pakistani establishment soon set about enforcing many of the same restrictive policies that the British Raj had set in place, in cases severely limiting the topics that could be covered by the press and the critiques that they could launch of the government. The restrictions on the press made it difficult for the progressives to follow through with publishing in many of the mainstream newspapers and instead they turned to literary journals. Through publications in these journals, they found an audience in the Pakistani middle

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<sup>101</sup> Asdar Ali, “Communists in a Muslim Homeland,” 530.

class and intelligentsia that was much bigger than the one they would have enjoyed had they produced purely political newsletters as they had hoped to earlier.<sup>102</sup>

As the group gained traction in the literary world, its ideological focus soon shifted towards a more hardline ideological orientation. The Pakistan PWA aligned closely with the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) and adopted the ideological stances of the organization to a greater extent than the PWA had in the colonial era. As the CPP and the PWA grew towards an extreme left-wing stance, the latter undertook an “intellectual purge” within its ranks.<sup>103</sup> While the organization had historically allowed for the involvement of writers of a variety of ideological backgrounds so long as they maintained an open outlook, in Pakistan it systematically issued resolutions to remove from its ranks all writers that it saw as being “non-progressive,” neutral, and moderate.<sup>104</sup> Labeling the writers as “opportunistic,” the PWA antagonized many writers from within its ranks.

Hyder was among the writers labelled “non-progressive.” As the organization cracked down on those it saw as veering from its hardening political stance, it lumped together those that disagreed with its stance as reactionaries. Having never expressed a hardened stance on the larger political stances taken up by the PWA and focusing instead on themes such as family, nationhood, and women’s position in society, Hyder was seen as an imposter among the “real” progressives. Her writing due to its highly stylized and seemingly “apolitical” nature and complex structure was not well-regarded by the PWA who saw her as being an artist who refused to take a clear political stance and was creating “art for arts sake” only. This along with the fact

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<sup>102</sup> Irfan Waheed Usmani, "Print Culture and Left-Wing Radicalism in Lahore, Pakistan, C. 1947-1971," Phd Diss., 2015.

<sup>103</sup> Kamran Asdar Ali, "Progressives and “Perverts”: Partition Stories and Pakistan's Future," *Social Text* 29, no. 3 (108) (2011), 7.

<sup>104</sup> Asdar Ali, “Communists in a Muslim Homeland,” 516.

that her writing never explicitly critiqued the capitalist system or sympathized with the subaltern classes, made her writings incompatible with the values of the PWA.<sup>105</sup> Hyder's seeming political ambivalence which led to a distancing from the organization, pointed to a break in the influence of the Pakistani progressive movement and represented the insular ideological shift of the group. Going from a group that once represented a variety of viewpoints and literary styles to one which shunned many from within its ranks led to the PWA losing much of the influence and respect it had once commanded in literary and intellectual circles.

In the few years after 1947, the Pakistani PWA enjoyed a level of critical success for its literature, but soon faced pushback and crackdown from the Pakistani government. Much like the PWA in colonial India, its Pakistani offshoot was closely aligned with the Communist party. With much of the leadership becoming members of or allying closely with the CPP, the PWA came to be regarded with growing suspicion by the conservative sections of society as well as the political establishment. With the Cold War raging on, and American intelligence agencies working to ensure newly independent states in the global south come under its sphere of influence, they actively worked to assist in staging military coups and spread fear of communism to maintain their geopolitical advantage. Pakistan was no exception, and the Red Scare spread throughout the country. As the Pakistani establishment pushed to integrate itself into the capitalist world order ruled by America and define the state along lines of conservatism, the secular, anti-capitalist and progressive politics of the Communist party came to be seen as a direct threat against their ideology. The political establishment categorized the PWA as a political party in 1951<sup>106</sup> and sought for it to be banned, with its literary activities being stopped under the pretense of being labelled communist propaganda. This severe crackdown on the PWA

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<sup>105</sup> Qureshi, "Progressives and 'Perverts'," 8.

<sup>106</sup> Asdar Ali, "Communists in a Muslim Homeland," 516.

and the CPP, which were characterized as un-Islamic and anti-Pakistan due to their secular stance, resulted in numerous high-ranking PWA members being jailed, thus leaving the literary organization leaderless and dysfunctional. As it attempted to recuperate from this government crackdown, the PWA had to significantly tone down its critiques of the government and distance itself from left-wing radicalism; however, most literary magazines distanced themselves from the group's writers due to fears of government censorship. Moreover, with the imposition of martial law following General Ayub Khan's military coup, the progressive movement lost its influence significantly as the characteristics that once made it revolutionary and popular were undermined.

The effects of state attacks on the progressive movement in Pakistan are apparent in Hyder's own career. In addition to being distanced from the PWA as it purged itself of those that did not hold radical leftist views, Hyder also suffered from the conservative government crackdown. Following the publication of *River of Fire*, Hyder came under fire from various conservative critics and writers who saw her novel as anti-Muslim propaganda. Conservative newspapers aligned with the political establishment critiqued the novel for portraying Muslims as "weak" and inferior in comparison to Hindus. Much of the critique stemmed from the perception that Hyder viewed Pakistan as inherently inferior to India, and was anti-Pakistan in her views. She focused more on ideals of religious coexistence and pluralism that were present in pre-partition India, undermining the nationalist narrative being put forth by the Pakistani establishment and bringing to question the very reason for Pakistani's existence, which was as an imagined homeland for the Subcontinent's Muslims.

Along with this, like the PWA, Hyder's career also suffered due to the imposition of martial law under Ayub Khan's military regime (1958 -1969). As it cracked down on progressives and liberals, with the imposition of martial law the dictatorship put in place strict

laws against freedom of speech and the spreading of “rumors” against the government. These restrictions put writers like Hyder, whose works were critical of the prevailing norms of society, under severe restrictions and a constant threat of arrest.<sup>107</sup> As a writer who envisioned society on the basis of equality, democracy, and secular humanism these authoritarian measures coupled with the conservative backlash to her writing left her in a state of unease over her status in the country. Along with this, allegations were also levelled against her for involvement with the CPI at a time that it was banned, made on the basis of her vocal appreciation of Rashid Jahan, who was an outspoken communist.<sup>108</sup>

Along with the government restrictions put in place by the martial law regime, Hyder also suffered at the hands of the progressive movement itself. Beyond her grouping into the cluster of writers the PWA found “non-progressive,” she often became the target of male chauvinism and sexism from various progressive writers, with her work and personal life coming under intense scrutiny by her male peers. Young and unmarried throughout her time in Pakistan, Hyder was repeatedly approached by her male colleagues in the PWA and other progressive institutions such as the Writer’s Guild with offers of marriage or critiques of her status as an unmarried woman.<sup>109</sup> Hyder found the attitudes of her male colleagues patronizing and intrusive, further distancing her from the progressive movement. Ultimately, the combined impact of sexism and political persecution convinced Hyder to move to Britain, and eventually back to India. Upon returning to India and taking up citizenship, Hyder maintained little to no formal

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<sup>107</sup> Asdar Ali, “Communists in a Muslim Homeland,” 517.

<sup>108</sup> Akhtar Balouch, “Why Did Qurratulain Hyder Leave Pakistan for India?,” DAWN.COM, October 05, 2015. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1210454>.

<sup>109</sup> Akhtar Balouch, “Why Did Qurratulain Hyder Leave Pakistan for India?,” DAWN.COM, October 05, 2015. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1210454>.

involvement with the progressive movement. However, she continued her career as a writer, publishing other novels and taught in various universities.

The issues that Hyder dealt with in Pakistan both as a writer and a woman that led to her departure, reflect many of the issues that had emerged in the Pakistan PWA, and highlight the Left's failure to uphold the message of equality, especially gender equality. Although aiming to maintain a progressive, forward-looking politics with a focus on inclusion and the betterment of minorities and women, the organization brought about little progress and even less success in influencing government reform or reform within its ranks. While its members' writing was popular, it was largely disseminated among the intelligentsia and did little to actually target the working and poorer classes. Over the years the association turned inwards and excluded any people that did not agree with its staunchly radical orientation, which alienated its membership, readership, and publication success. Moreover, it was wholly paternalistic and patriarchal, excluding women from leadership positions and feeding into misogyny and sexism that permeated much of society, rather than challenging it in any substantial way.

### **Conclusion**

Hyder's career trajectory and involvement with the PWA in the post-colonial context represents the various issues –both internal and external – that arose within the organization and ultimately led to its fall from grace. By the late 1960s, it had ceased to be of importance among forward-thinking Pakistanis and lost its place within the conversation for a progressive socio-political culture for a country that was still actively working to define itself in the face of authoritarian repression. As a writer, Hyder continued the tradition of radical feminist critique that her predecessor Jahan set, offering a look at the way that gendered oppression and female subjugation had been intrinsic to Indian society throughout various points of its history, rather

than simply being a product of colonialism. Her feminist critique of Indian society as well as her nuanced look at partition violence and the modern Indian and Pakistani nation-states established her as one of the most forward-thinking writers in the organization. A focus on the issues faced by Hyder – from criticism for her ostensibly anti-Muslim rhetoric and suppression under martial law, to sexism from other progressives – the writer’s career trajectory becomes indicative of the issues that led to the Pakistani PWA decline and its eventual cultural irrelevance.

### **Conclusion**

The Progressive Writers’ Association held a prominent position in both colonial and postcolonial South Asia and was integral to the formation and cultivation of the region’s leftist movement. It emerged as an avenue for the articulation of ideas which presented an egalitarian, equitable, and inclusive vision of the nation free from economic disparity and tyrannical and imperial rule. And though the movement is most remembered through the works of male writers such as Sajjad Zahir, its female writers not only exemplified the movement’s egalitarian, radical, and inclusive politics, but also mirrored its trajectory in the colonial and post-colonial context. While scholarship has largely focused on the male writers of the movement and the high politics of the PWA, the female writers’ contributions often outmatch those of their male counterparts, especially in the case of Rashid Jahan and Qurratulain Hyder.

Jahan is largely historicized as a writer who made significant contributions to feminist literature, but she also personified the broader ideals of the movement. Writing about gender and the position of women in Indian society, she used the experiences and stories of her characters as a lens through which to inspect and critique the various other inequalities and issues that the PWA rallied around, such as class inequality, anti-imperialism, and religious conservatism and hypocrisy. Far ahead in her radicalism and political vision than most of her male counterparts,

Jahan chose to forego critiquing certain groups or individuals and instead challenged institutions and systems as a whole. Rather than operating within systems such as patriarchy, which many men did, especially when critiquing female oppression, Jahan spoke for the dismantling of these oppressive systems for true liberation. In her leftist feminist vision, Jahan linked patriarchy and capitalism as intersectional forces that work to oppress not only women, but also individuals at all levels of society.

Furthermore, Jahan actively worked to move past the elitist nature of the PWA that many of its writers in colonial India continued to feed into. Jahan made concerted efforts to maintain an egalitarian and accessible tone in her writings. Using simple literary forms and characterizations as well as utilizing media beyond the written word, such as radio and stage plays, Jahan made her work accessible to the masses regardless of their levels of literacy or class status. In doing so, Jahan emerged not only as a champion of the oppressed in Indian society, but also as the true embodiment of the early years of the PWA more than any other writer in late-colonial India.

Much like the way that Rashid Jahan embodied the politics and rise of the PWA, Hyder came to embody the radical politics and the eventual decline of the PWA in the postcolonial context. Through her groundbreaking novel *River of Fire*, Hyder stretched the boundaries of Urdu literature and the types of stories that were expected of female writers. The novel historicizes the evolution and mythology of the subcontinent and touches on the importance of every period of its history, from the early Vedic to post-partition, and the places women have occupied in these histories. And it is through this exploration of South Asia's history that Hyder provides a radical critique of the current state of South Asia and the artificiality of the 1947

nation-states, which despite common history and culture have both come to adapt regional and exclusionary nationalist visions.

Moreover, Hyder's career trajectory within the Pakistani PWA offers insights into the unfortunate decline of the once-radical and forward-looking literary collective. Through her experiences with government suppression, shunning from the core progressives, and sexism and harassment – all of which led her to return to India via Britain – one gets a sense of the decline in the influence of the PWA as well as its deviation from its once radical and inclusive outlook. Hyder's time in Pakistan's progressive circles highlights how the Pakistani PWA went from a once thriving and influential organization to an inwards looking and ravaged group that held little merit even among intellectual circles of Pakistan.

Progressive women such as Rashid Jahan and Qurratulain Hyder deserve to be integrated into the core of any understanding and discussion of the PWA in its colonial and post-colonial incarnations. They were integral to defining the progressive politics and worldview of the literary organization and often went beyond their male counterparts in their critiques and contributions. Their literary, political, and feminist legacy is plain to see in the careers of other progressive movements and their writers in South Asia, including journalist Zaib-un-nisa Habibullah and writers Khadija Mastoor and Kamala Das, all of whom draw inspiration from the fiery, outspoken, feminist legacies set forth by Jahan and Hyder.

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