

BOOK REVIEW

Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Pakistani Urdu Writing. Amina Yaqin (London: Anthem Press, 2022). pp. 294 £80.00, ISBN-13: 978-1-78527-755-9
doi:10.1017/cps.2024.5

Amina Yaqin's textured discussion of female sexuality in Urdu poetry by women poets in post-Partition Pakistan is a welcome addition to the scholarly study of women's poetry in Pakistan, a subject that has, for reasons beyond comprehension, earned much less attention in the Anglophone world than it deserves. Rukhsana Ahmed's bi-lingual anthology of translations of select Urdu women poets, *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, was the last serious engagement with feminist voices. Published in Britain in 1991, Ahmed's contribution coincided with a time when the Pakistani state, in the wake of the "Islamicist" regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, was encroaching on domestic spaces through legislation such as the "Hudood Ordinances." In re-signifying rape as fornication, re-enforcing codes of veiling, and punishing transgressors, the state made the sexualized body a site of its moral authority. However, instead of focusing on these contexts, Yaqin's book situates feminist articulations of gender and sexuality in Urdu writings of postcolonial Pakistan within the broader literary history of Urdu writings in the subcontinent's partly pre-colonial and mostly colonial phase to draw attention to continuities and discontinuities in how Urdu poets and writers construed female sexuality and subjectivity; views that also overlapped into their diverse positionalities vis-à-vis the secular/sacred debate. Even as one concurs with Yaqin that the politics of gender cannot be separated from the aesthetics of the canonical Urdu literary tradition, the two separate trajectories followed by Urdu poetry in post-Partition India and Pakistan evidence the substantive role played by socio-political context in shaping Urdu poetic expression.

Furthermore, Yaqin examines women poets' feminist articulations of gender and sexuality along the axis of the secular and sacred. Highlighting how, from Iqbal to progressive poets such as Faiz and Jalib, Urdu poets' engagement with gender has been imbricated in their response to the sacred/secular question, and Islam vs the West by extension, Yaqin locates women's poetic articulations in the post-secular domain. Tracing the trajectory of women's poetry from Sara Shagufta, Zehra Nigah, Parveen Shakir, and Ada Jafri to the two stalwarts of Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riyaz, Yaqin argues that all these poets located their struggles in the interstitial space between the sacred and secular, as both these polarities manifest the complex functioning of power.

The book weaves in discussions of Deputy Nazir Ahmed's *Miratul Uroos*, Thanawi's *Bahishti Zavar*, Ruswa's *Umrao Jan*, and a brief discussion of the autobiographical writing of Muhammadi Begum to argue that "Nineteenth-century Muslim reformists targeted women as metonymic signifiers of the 'plight of their community' and the

courtesan became a symbol of the regressive past (p. 5).” Here, Yaqin’s use of *rekhti* (rekhti poetry, though mostly written by men, was distinguished by its use of begumati zaban (language of the women), a female speaker and an engagement with women’s lives) as a site to argue the linguistic and formal manifestation of the Urdu literary canon’s engagement with female sexuality is intriguing. Even as most *rekhti* poets were men, the link between *rekhti* and the bazaar seems tenuous. For instance, while it is true that Rangin’s *rekhti* poetry has been attributed to his passion for prostitutes, all prostitutes did not necessarily resort to *rekhti* – e.g., Ruswa’s Umrao Jan, a courtesan par excellence, who composes poetry in Rekhta and is offended when the narrator points this out. The placing of Umrao, the poet, within the domain of the elite Rekhta tradition destabilizes assumptions around the language-gender continuum. However, the analysis of Yaqin’s book hinges on the relationship between the secular and sacred as connected moral and ethical concepts contained within “the dialogical voices of the texts,” instead of treating them as oppositional concepts.

Yaqin highlights women poets who wrote from within the *zenana* space, such as Zahida Khatun Sherwania and Haya Lakhnavi, yet many of the writings Yaqin selects to contextualize women’s writings are by men. This takes us to the question of real and discursive women. While male writers discursively engaged with the women’s question throughout the Reform and the nationalist phase, prompting Faisal Devji to call women “the most illustrious symbol of orthodox privacy . . . an exclamation of Islam,” women writers did not necessarily reject this normative frame to articulate their real selves.¹ They often resorted to a double-voiced discourse, as can be traced in the *islahi* (reform) literature produced by women at the beginning of the twentieth century. The question of writing, therefore, cannot be dealt with in isolation from the question of reading. It is imperative to ask who is reading texts by women writers and how. This is evidenced in Yaqin’s inclusion of Parvin Shakir in the category of feminist poets, considering Rukhsana Ahmed’s earlier refusal to do so.

Yaqin attributes great credit to the two male-led poetic currents in post-Partition Pakistan, Progressives and Modernists via PWA and Halqa-i-Arbab-i-Zauq, who, according to Yaqin, played an instrumental role in enabling women to regain their voice in the Urdu literary sphere and indulge in unhindered articulations of their sexuality. Yaqin deftly argues that even as these women poets opened a new idiom of self-expression and gendered agency in Urdu poetry, women’s voices of resistance did not gain the popularity that Habib Jalib enjoyed.

The last two chapters of the book are focused on two iconic feminist voices from Pakistan, Fehmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed, and their engagement with body politic and embodied female subjectivity within the ambit of secular-sacred debates. Unable to cope with relentless repressions and strangulating misogyny, these women poets vented their emotions in their own ways, by “baring it all.” However, what sets Kishwar Naheed apart from other contemporary women writers and poets was her ability to reject, with unprecedented irreverence, all the institutions of society. Like the “possessed witch” of the American confessional poet Anne Sexton, she “is not a

¹ Faisal Fatehali Devji, “Gender and the politics of space: The movement for women’s reform in Muslim India, 1857–1900,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1991): 153, DOI: 10.1080/00856409108723151.

woman quite,” and like the Lady Lazarus of Sylvia Plath, eats men “like air.” This leads us to the question of the intersection of local and global in these women’s poetry, as, apart from the Urdu literary canon, the influence of Western feminist poets can also be distinctly traced in their poetry; in particular, in their use of poetry as a site of self-performativity. Likewise, while the book mentions Urdu’s hybrid nature, it would be interesting to note the influence of *bhasha* literary traditions, such as poetic genres of *kajri*, *geet*, etc., in shaping women’s voices in Urdu.

Finally, Yaqin deserves accolades for her lucid translations of the *nazms* by women poets. In tracing the intersectionality of poetry and gender with secular/sacred politics, Yaqin becomes an active participant in the production of feminist knowledge from the global south that transgresses assumptions based on colonial legacies and neoliberal politics to pitch an ethics of “alterity.”

Nishat Zaidi
Jamia Millia Islamia Central University, New Delhi, India
Email: nzaidi@jmi.ac.in