

Behind the Veil/ Lifting the Veil – Politics of Spatial Boundaries in Rashid Jahan’s *Behind the Veil* and Ismat Chughtai’s *The Quilt*

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Abstract

The *zenana*, in an orthodox Muslim household, often acts as a spatial divide between the public and the domestic, and in Foucauldian terms, as a barrier between knowledge and repression. Veiling is integral to the politicization of Muslim women’s bodies. Rashid Jahan, a gynaecologist and one of the pioneering women writers of the Progressive Writers Movement, dedicated herself to the task of interrogating the position of Muslim women during the pre-independence era; especially the disadvantages they had to suffer due to their secluded and cloistered life, the perils of early marriage, apathy towards their reproductive health, and the agony of frequent pregnancies. Her short story in the form of a one-act play, *Parde ke Piche (Behind the Veil)* works towards unveiling the hypocrisy and invisible oppression that Muslim middle class women were subjected to.

Ismat Chughtai carried forward the legacy of Jahan in her bold, progressive voice as she critiqued the double bind of religion and gender politics through the representation of her female protagonists. Her infamous short story, *Lihaaf (The Quilt)* is an attempt to make visible – to ‘unveil’ the highly politicized, space of the *zenana* or the inner chambers of the Muslim household. The plot of the story positions the *zenana* as a paradox – traditionally constructed to maintain sexual purity of women in a marital home, is here re-defined and re-structured to provide a queer space for an intimate relationship between Begum Jan and her maid.

Thus, I seek to interrogate and analyze the *zenana* as a liminal space of ambiguity in my paper. It can act both as a constraint and an agent to subvert the patriarchal ideological basis and destabilize it.

Key words: politics of spatial boundary, Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, *zenana*, liminal space, subversion, patriarchy.