

**Yaqin, Amina. *Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Pakistani Urdu Writing*. ISBN 9781785277566 (Anthem Press, 2022), 280 pages**

**Reviewed by**

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Based on two decades of exploration of the legacy of 20th-century feminist Urdu poets, Amina Yaqin's recent book, *Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Pakistani Urdu Writing* (Anthem Press, 2022), focuses on feminist movements, transnational approaches to gender, the nexus between poetry and politics in the context of South Asia. The initial three chapters present the historical and political contextualization of Urdu poetry as a male domain and the progressive resilience of female poets who resisted sexual politics through education and creative writing. The next two chapters shed light on the life and feminist resistance of Fehmida Riaz (1946-2018) and Kishwar Naheed (1940-).

In the first chapter, 'Poetry Politics and Women' Yaqin explores literary history to deconstruct the hierarchies of language and gender. The discussion suggests that cultural knowledge and poetic tradition fit into the context of conformity and resistance as exemplified through the traditions of *mushairas* (poetry recitals) and other public domains (for instance, poetry displayed on rickshaws, recited in public spaces in the form of *qawali* or free theatre).

The second chapter traces the inspiration drawn from earlier South Asian feminist poets and writers. This prominently includes Zubunisa Begum, Mahalaqa Bai Chanda, Kashmiri poets Lalla Ded (1320-1392), and Huba Kahtun. Yaqin identifies these feminist poets as influenced by folk traditions, Islamic values, Hindu devotionism, and Sufi mysticism. Their

poetry represented romance, resilience, and retribution. Their poetry significantly changed the perception of *Zenana* (women's quarters/ circles) as a symbol of revolutionary activity and political mobilization as exemplified in the works of Sarojini Naidu and Christian Paris Cornelia Sorabji, whereas, the majority of well-acknowledged male writers (except Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Saadat Hassan Manto), persistently warned them about their diversion from their traditional roles. Women's gendered voices were flattened by male authors (*Murat ul Aroos*, and *Umrao Jaan Ada*) flattening the gendered voices. According to Yaqin, this reflected the crises of masculinity and intellectual differences between genders. The creative inputs of middle-class female writers such as Rashid Jahan (*Angare*) and Ismat Chughtai were regarded as 'offending sexualities' (78). Yaqin critiques the Progressive Writers Movement (1935) for its contradictory stance towards rejecting the institutionalized practices of religion and following the international leftists' aspirations while remaining divided on the view of sexuality. The author debates that the representation of gender in Urdu texts can therefore be explored through social contexts, linguistic registers, and literary forms (such as *rekhti* as a low linguistic register associated with women).

The third chapter augments this discussion on sexual politics and feminist poetic activism within the context of the Progressive Writers' Movement in the first half of the twentieth century, especially through performative public discourses such as *mushairas* (public poetry recitals). The author asserts that as a colonial legacy, the stigma associated with dance music, public performers, and comedians (*bhands*) was also applicable to female poets performing publicly. This chapter primarily focuses on the controversial literary figure of Fehmida Riaz through her striving to establish herself as a woman writer. Born in Meerut, she migrated to London after her traumatic marriage. Later, she returned to Karachi. She contributed poetry, prose, fiction, metaphorical storytelling, and journalistic writings in Urdu.

Her works were influenced by Taoism, ethnographic narratives, the *Adivasi* (indigenous) community, multilingual Indic and Islamic influences (despite regarding herself as an atheist), Iranian resistance poet Forough Farakhzad, and the Sufi influence of Rumi and Shams. Her style experimented with formal structures of Urdu and is influenced by the romantic lyricism of Faiz's poetry. According to Yaqin, she wrote 'a realistic prose fiction as a microcosm of a conflict-ridden city and nation' (124) while redefining the world of *ghazal* poetry. Influenced by the Democratic Women's Federation, the Women's Wing of the Communist Party in Pakistan, Yaqin considers Fehmida's work as reflecting a sacred-secular perspective, a gendered identity beyond religious or language barriers anchored within the context of Karachi. Her sexually liberated erotic language defied social, linguistic, and religious constructions and the social and political stigmatization of *sharif* (pious) middle-class women. She questioned the 'hyper-masculinity' of the Progressive Writers' Movement which excluded women from the socio-political or socialist discourse. The second part of this chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of Fehmida's selected rebellious post-East Pakistan independence poems (1968-1973) and her exile poems (1981-1987). Yaqin identifies the themes of existential crisis, facing taboos, faith, objectification of the female body, honor, and shame in Fehmida's poetry. As a political activist representing radical writing in Urdu, threatened by General Zia-ul-Haq's martial regime (1978-1988), she took refuge in India. Resisting such impositions, she touched on the theme of religious fundamentalism. She reflected on *hudood ordinance* imposed by Zia and questioned religion and secularism in India in her poem 'Naya Bharat' which focused on the Babri Mosque incident (6 December 1992).

The final chapter reviews Kishwar Naheed's (1940) contributions as a 'Dreamer, Story Teller, Change Maker'. Kishwar was regarded as the Virginia Woolf of Pakistan. Her diverse background as a Civil Servant, broadcaster, presenter, and activist was complemented by

national and global acknowledgment and contributions. Like Fehmida, her bold writing style created a male bias against her creativity. Her translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) was banned in Pakistan on allegations of obscenity and later published in India with an altered title in 1994. Like other feminist writers of her time, she was questioned on the issues of morality, and her modern approaches to dressing up against Islamic principles which turned her into a controversial figure. Her writings reflected on women's bodies being treated as a text. Facing a traumatic marriage to an Urdu poet her poetry explored the themes of love, marriage, desire, and confinement. Yaqin discusses her autobiography *Buri Aurat ki Katha*, which reflects on her diverse roles as a woman and writer which are redefined in the context of Pakistani nation. Her dialogic poem, 'Hear Me' addresses the prime minister to question the rights of women and minorities.

This book is an important contribution for researchers exploring South Asian feminist voices as an alternative and rarely explored resource.