

## Reading *Angaaray* as a Progressive Manifesto from Colonial India

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### Abstract:

Published in 1932, *Angaaray* stands as a revolutionary critique of British India's colonial and social structures, challenging feudal hierarchies, religious orthodoxy, and patriarchal oppression. This paper explores how the anthology's narratives expose the interconnected injustices of gender exploitation, class inequality, and colonial subjugation. By examining works by Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, and others, it highlights *Angaaray*'s bold reimagining of literature as a tool for resistance and social reform. Situating the anthology within the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM), the paper traces its role in reshaping Urdu literature to address systemic inequities. Furthermore, it considers *Angaaray*'s enduring legacy, both as a seminal text in South Asian literature and as a beacon for progressive discourse. Through its fearless critique, *Angaaray* remains a vital contribution to understanding the intersections of literature, politics, and social justice, with continued relevance for contemporary struggles.

**Keywords:** *Angaaray*, Progressive Writers' Movement, Colonial India, Gender Inequality, Class Hierarchies, Patriarchy.

The early 20th century in British India was a period of profound social and political transformation, marked by the intensification of nationalist struggles against colonial rule and the emergence of progressive ideals. During this era, the resistance to British exploitation intertwined with challenges to rigid societal and religious structures, inspiring a collective vision for self-determination and social justice. The Indian independence movement, spearheaded by iconic leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, symbolized this dual struggle, advocating for political freedom while navigating the complexities of entrenched social hierarchies. At the same time, progressive thinkers and activists began to address issues of gender inequality, caste oppression, and economic disparity, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable society. This dynamic interplay of nationalist and reformist energies found expression in literary and cultural movements that sought to critique and transform the social fabric of colonial India.

In this evolving socio-political landscape, intellectual resistance became a cornerstone of nationalist movements. These efforts, deeply informed by progressive ideals, aimed to dismantle colonial exploitation while simultaneously addressing internal systems of oppression. As Kumari Jayawardena notes, “feminism and nationalism in the Third World were often intertwined,” yet nationalist agendas frequently relegated women’s liberation to the margins, prioritizing the broader goal of independence over comprehensive social reform (Jayawardena 87). It was within this context of intersecting struggles that *Angaaray* emerged as a ground-breaking anthology, challenging not only the British colonial establishment but also the deeply ingrained patriarchal and religious structures that perpetuated systemic injustice.

Published in December 1932, *Angaaray* represented a bold intervention in Urdu literature, authored by a collective of progressive writers including Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Mahmud-uz-Zafar, and Ahmed Ali. The anthology unflinchingly critiqued the moral and social hypocrisies of its time, particularly those embedded in patriarchal practices, class hierarchies, and religious orthodoxy. Meenakshi Mukherjee highlights the exceptional nature of Rashid Jahan’s participation in the anthology, noting how it paved the way for women writers to critique societal norms within organized literary movements (Mukherjee 79–92). Its stories exposed the grim realities of women’s oppression and the exploitation of the working class, positioning literature as a powerful vehicle for social change. Despite being banned under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code for allegedly “hurting religious sentiments,” *Angaaray* ignited spirited debates across intellectual and literary circles. While its detractors among conservative and religious factions vehemently opposed its radical message, the anthology garnered admiration from progressive thinkers for its fearless critique of societal norms (Ali and Rashed 92).

The controversy surrounding *Angaaray* proved catalytic, serving as a precursor to the Progressive Writers’ Movement (PWM), officially established in 1936. The PWM’s manifesto rejected escapist literature, advocating instead for works that directly confronted pressing issues such as poverty, communalism, gender inequality, and exploitation. As Aijaz Ahmad notes, the PWM was not an isolated literary phenomenon but deeply embedded in global anti-fascist, anti-colonial, and socialist movements, reflecting a broader ethos of resistance against systemic oppression (Ahmad 26–32). Central to its mission was the belief that literature should not merely reflect society but actively challenge and reshape it, guided by principles of scientific rationalism and progressive thought (Akhtar and Zaidi 149; Ali and Rashed 95).

As a forerunner to the PWM, *Angaaray* epitomized the confluence of Marxist ideology and the distinct socio-political challenges of colonial India. However, as Carlo Coppola and Sajida Zubair note, not all contributors to *Angaaray* subscribed to a rigid ideological framework. Ahmed Ali, for instance, resisted the increasingly doctrinaire approach of Socialist Realism within the PWM, arguing for a nuanced intersection of art and politics that avoided reducing literature to mere propaganda (Coppola and Zubair 49–53). Stories like *Dulari* and *In the Women’s Quarters* portrayed the intersecting oppressions faced by women and domestic workers, defying literary conventions and critiquing entrenched hierarchies. Through these narratives, *Angaaray* redefined literature as an instrument of social critique and reform, advocating for a more egalitarian society (Ali and Rashed 93). This paper situates *Angaaray* within the broader framework of progressive literature, analysing its critique of patriarchal, religious, and colonial systems and exploring its lasting influence on socially engaged literary traditions.

The stories in *Angaaray* provide a stark depiction of the pervasive gender inequality and systemic oppression that characterized early 20th-century British India. Through their narratives, the authors dismantle entrenched patriarchal norms that stripped women of agency and reduced them to objects of exploitation. Sajjad Zaheer’s *Dulari* stands as a powerful critique of this dehumanization. The story’s protagonist, a servant girl, grows up in the shadow of a feudal household, condemned to a life

of invisibility, drudgery, and sexual exploitation. Zaheer juxtaposes her plight against the privileged lives of the feudal family's children, emphasizing the dual burdens of class and gender oppression. Ultimately, Dulari's descent into prostitution becomes a searing indictment of a society that offers marginalized women no viable alternatives.

Rashid Jahan's *In the Women's Quarters* similarly explores the devastating effects of patriarchal control on women's lives. Mahmudi Begum, married at 17, endures relentless pregnancies that leave her physically and emotionally broken. Her husband, wielding religious and patriarchal authority, denies her autonomy, including her right to breastfeed her children. He manipulates religious texts to justify his oppressive demands and threatens to marry another, younger woman to reinforce his control. Drawing from her experiences as a physician, Jahan exposes the intersection of religion and patriarchy as mechanisms to subordinate women, reducing them to mere instruments of reproduction and servitude. This trenchant critique aligns with the broader goals of the Progressive Writers' Movement, which sought to challenge and transform oppressive gender norms entrenched in societal and religious practices (Akhtar and Zaidi 147).

The stories in *Angaaray* also examine the deeply entrenched class hierarchies of colonial Indian society, offering a searing critique of feudalism. This exploitative system, rooted in the subjugation of the working class, is sharply interrogated in *Dulari*. Sajjad Zaheer contrasts the opulent, privileged lives of the feudal family with the abject conditions endured by their servants. Dulari, though raised alongside the children of the household, is relegated to a life of servitude and expendability. Her dual marginalization as both a labourer and a woman places her at the lowest rung of the social ladder. Through this poignant narrative, Zaheer exposes the inherent dehumanization within feudal power structures, positioning it not as a failing of the system but as a deliberate and defining characteristic (Ali and Rashed 95).

This critique aligns seamlessly with the manifesto of the Progressive Writers' Association, which urged literature to reflect the struggles of the marginalized and oppressed. By rejecting romantic escapism in favour of confronting the stark realities of class inequality, the authors of *Angaaray* marked a radical departure from traditional Urdu literature. Their stories compel readers to confront the brutal inequities of feudal society, challenging the romanticized portrayal of such norms in conventional literary works (Akhtar and Zaidi 149).

*Angaaray* repeatedly interrogates the role of religious orthodoxy in perpetuating oppressive societal structures. Ahmed Ali's work within the anthology critiques the co-option of religious practices to reinforce social hierarchies, a stance that Carlo Coppola describes as emblematic of his broader literary philosophy, where art interrogates but transcends the confines of ideological dogma (Coppola and Zubair 49–53). The anthology's writers boldly critique how religious doctrines are manipulated to justify exploitation, particularly of women and the working class. In *In the Women's Quarters*, Rashid Jahan vividly portrays how Mahmudi Begum's husband uses religious precepts to reinforce patriarchal authority. By invoking his interpretation of religious obligations, he suppresses Mahmudi's protests, weaponizing faith to legitimize her suffering and ensure his dominance within the household. This manipulation of religion underscores its complicity in sustaining gendered and class-based oppression.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* offers a compelling framework to understand this dynamic, emphasizing how colonial powers weaponized religion to control both the material and intellectual lives of the colonized. Said argues that colonial narratives often framed the colonized as needing "civilizing," thereby justifying their subjugation through cultural and religious rhetoric (Said 56). This critique resonates with *Angaaray's* exploration of how religious orthodoxy is co-opted to maintain patriarchal and feudal systems, revealing the insidious ways in which faith can be exploited to uphold inequality and injustice.

*Angaaray* transcends its identity as a literary anthology to function as a profound social document, offering a trenchant critique of the oppressive structures in colonial India. The anthology exposes multiple axes of exploitation—colonial subjugation, class hierarchies, religious orthodoxy, and patriarchy—delivering a powerful indictment of the socio-political realities of the time. Through its

fearless narratives, *Angaaray* confronts societal hypocrisies and envisions a blueprint for social reform, aligning with the transformative aspirations of the Progressive Writers' Movement.

The colonial framework of British India provides the foundation for *Angaaray*'s narratives, highlighting how imperial exploitation intersected with entrenched social inequities. The anthology emerged during a period of heightened colonial domination, where British policies drained India's resources and reinforced feudal hierarchies to maintain control. The stories in *Angaaray* reveal how colonial oppression not only exploited India economically but also exacerbated social inequalities. Bernard Cohn's observation that colonialism was not merely a political structure but also a tool for manipulating knowledge to sustain imperial dominance offers a valuable lens through which to view *Angaaray*'s critique (Cohn 68).

The duality of colonial modernity, which promoted progress while perpetuating inequities, is sharply reflected in the anthology. While the British propagated ideas of modernization, they maintained feudal systems that served their imperial interests. This contradiction is evident in characters like Mahmudi Begum in *In the Women's Quarters*, whose suffering is compounded by patriarchal traditions and the colonial economic order, which intensifies gendered labour inequalities. Javed Akhtar underscores the role of the Progressive Writers' Movement in challenging such systems, emphasizing the power of literature to reveal the fractures within colonial ideologies and their broader societal impact (Akhtar and Zaidi 148).

A pivotal element of *Angaaray*'s social critique lies in its examination of the gendered division between public and private spheres. Stories like *In the Women's Quarters* dismantle the myth of the home as a sanctuary, portraying it instead as a locus of patriarchal oppression. Mahmudi Begum's experiences illustrate how domestic spaces, far from offering respite, are governed by the same authoritarian norms that dominate the public sphere. Rashid Jahan's narrative vividly demonstrates how women's roles are confined to the boundaries of domesticity, dictated by male authority and reinforced through religious doctrine.

This critique resonates with the broader goals of the Progressive Writers' Movement, which sought not just to acknowledge women's suffering but to advocate for their liberation. As Javed Akhtar notes, the movement's literary efforts aimed to challenge both traditional patriarchal norms and the colonial legal frameworks that institutionalized gender inequality. Writers like Rashid Jahan envisioned a world where women could reclaim their autonomy, breaking free from the dual oppressions of patriarchy and imperialism (Akhtar and Zaidi 147).

The legacy of *Angaaray* transcends its initial controversy and subsequent ban, solidifying its status as a cornerstone of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM). As a pioneering text, it redefined South Asian literature by positioning it as a tool for social and political transformation. By confronting the entrenched structures of colonialism, feudalism, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy, *Angaaray* challenged the traditional boundaries of literary expression and advocated for a radical reimagining of society. Its influence is evident in the PWM's formation and the enduring relevance of its themes, which continue to resonate in contemporary discourse on justice and equity.

The revolutionary ideas in *Angaaray* extended beyond the confines of British India, resonating with global movements advocating social and political reform. Its focus on class struggle and alignment with Marxist principles mirrored the intellectual currents of the time, such as the Bolshevik Revolution and anti-fascist movements of the 1930s. These international connections enriched the vision of the PWM, fostering a cross-cultural dialogue that linked South Asian writers with global struggles for justice and equality. By weaving local narratives into a broader framework of resistance, *Angaaray* not only contributed to the PWM's ideological foundation but also underscored the universal relevance of its call for transformative change.

*Angaaray* remains a landmark in South Asian literature—a daring and uncompromising anthology that challenged the deeply entrenched systems of oppression in colonial India. Published in 1932, it was more than a literary milestone; it was a bold social and political declaration that critiqued the intertwined structures of colonial exploitation, feudal oppression, patriarchal dominance, and religious orthodoxy. Through its unflinching narratives, *Angaaray* exposed the hypocrisies and inequities of its era, serving as both a mirror to society's harsh realities and a clarion call for transformative change.

The anthology's fearless critique of societal norms resonated profoundly with the nascent Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM). By envisioning literature as a vehicle for reform, *Angaaray* laid the intellectual and ideological groundwork for a movement that sought to free art from the confines of conservatism and elitism. The PWM amplified *Angaaray's* mission, advocating for a literature that directly addressed pressing social issues, including poverty, gender inequality, and communalism. As Ahmed Ali and Javed Akhtar have noted, *Angaaray* played a pivotal role in redefining Urdu literature, transforming it into a platform for resistance and progressive thought.

The legacy of *Angaaray* transcends its immediate influence on the PWM. Its themes remain strikingly relevant in contemporary discussions of systemic oppression, particularly in the realms of patriarchal control, class inequality, and the misuse of religion as a tool for social subjugation. By highlighting the commodification of women's bodies, the exploitation of the working class, and the hypocrisies of orthodoxy, *Angaaray* continues to provide a critical lens for examining enduring social injustices.

Moreover, *Angaaray* exemplifies the power of cross-cultural intellectual engagement. Its alignment with global progressive movements, from Marxist thought to anti-fascist ideologies, underscores the interconnectedness of struggles for justice and equality. By drawing on international ideas while remaining deeply rooted in local realities, *Angaaray* demonstrated the potential of literature to transcend borders and foster a collective vision for a more equitable world.

*Angaaray* serves as a pioneering work in colonial India, critiquing the intertwined forces of colonialism, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy. Through its bold literary style and progressive outlook, it offered an alternative vision of society, challenging the rigid class hierarchies and gender norms of the time. By situating the anthology within the context of the broader political movements, including the Progressive Writers' Movement, the paper highlights *Angaaray's* role as a catalyst for literary and social change. Its influence resonates beyond the immediate historical moment, continuing to shape progressive discourse and inspire future generations of writers and thinkers committed to challenging systemic oppression. Thus, *Angaaray* remains a critical text in understanding the intersections of literature, politics, and social reform in colonial India. This exploration of *Angaaray* ultimately underscores the power of literature as both a reflection and a tool for societal transformation, illustrating how the voices of the marginalized continue to inform and inspire progressive thought today.

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