

Experiments in Subaltern Intimacy: Rashid Jahan's Feminist Phenomenology

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'I didn't think it would turn out this way' is the secret epitaph of intimacy. To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. —Lauren Berlant

The recent publication of two English translations of the vastly understudied socialist feminist fiction of Urdu activist and author, Rashid Jahan (1905-1952), occasions this article.¹ Jahan's feminist activism in 1930s India was wide-ranging—she offered women's healthcare in lower caste and class communities, educated women in reproductive health and marriage rape in sweepers colonies, held adult education classes, ran her own gynecological medical practice, participated in trade union rallies and protest marches, wrote articles for her political magazine, *Chingari*, and authored and orchestrated political street theater.² Jahan was a doctor, an accomplished journalist, a short-story writer, and a playwright. She also wrote and directed her own theater and radio plays, and adapted the stories of Chekov, Gorky, James Joyce, and Premchand for radio. Rashid Jahan was one of few women to join the communist party of India in the 1930s; she, in fact, chose to be buried in Moscow, where she spent her final days, her epitaph reading: "Communist. Doctor. Writer." Infamously, Jahan was the sole woman among a group of Urdu writers who, in 1933, published an incendiary collection of short stories called 'Angarey' ("burning coals"), which staged a Marxist and feminist critique of both the Islamic orthodoxy and the colonial government in India. The publication created such backlash in the Muslim communities that the colonial government banned it and had all copies burned. As Priyamavada Gopal writes, "Jahan became an icon of the literary radicalism of *Angarey* itself, decried by some and celebrated by others," and it was from this position that Jahan "would find herself thinking about articulating a critique of colonialism without conceding ground to patriarchy and traditionalists within her community" (Gopal 42).³ Testifying to the enduring controversy of Jahan's legacy, in 2004 Aligarh Muslim University banned a proposed observance of Rashid Jahan's centenary, fearing it would provoke political agitation.

Rashid Jahan and her work provide a critical window into the history and culture of Indo-Soviet collaborations which gave rise to a prominent anti-colonial Muslim intelligentsia active in India during the era of decolonization, what has been called the “progressive” legacy in the history of Indian aesthetic and cultural production, including authors such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Mulk Raj Anand, and Ahmed Ali. Many of these writers organized formally under the title of the All-India Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and the Indian People’s Theater Association (IPTA). As such, the writings of Jahan reflect the rich cross-traffic of aesthetics and ideas that emerged out of this internationalist moment, refracted through the Soviet socialist-realist form taken up by Marxist or “Progressive” literary movements in India. My focus in this essay is on her phenomenological approaches to feminist decolonial practices in India that emerge in her socialist-realist experiments with the Urdu short story form. An attentiveness to the affective and sensorial dimensions of Jahan’s literature provides a far more incisive mobilization of the “subaltern” consciousness than previously understood. In this way, this essay conjugates a postcolonial feminist critique with contemporary affect studies, fields that rarely speak to each other, through the prism of what I call subaltern intimacy.⁴

Jahan was a prominent figure among the generation of Marxist authors and activists in India during the era of decolonization that had long been dismissed as naively adopting the Marxist aesthetic protocols of representing the peasant or proletariat’s plight.⁵ This book joins the output of a number of scholars who counter such easy dismissals including Priyamvada Gopal, Aamir Mufti, Gayatri Gopinath, Geeta Patel, Ulka Anjaria, Toral Gajarawala, Snehal Shingavi, Ben Conisbee Baer, Alex Padamsee, and Jessica Berman.⁶ Focusing on three of Jahan’s short stories, I examine how she comes to align her reader in a tense set of proximities and relationships with the subaltern women of her short stories. I interrogate how the three stories balance on peculiar phenomenological orientations between the middle-class narrator and subaltern subject of the story. I am interested in these alignments for how they angle the reader. Jahan depicts the intimacy of this contact in some scenarios through erotic registers; in others, revulsion. And yet, for other stories, the intimacy of the encounter does not emerge from palpable exchanges of the visual or the tactile, but rather from the uncomfortable proximities of likeness—the “closeness” of an undesired resemblance.

What would it mean to imagine as Jahan urges us to, a politics of intimacy without empathy? Each of the three stories I examine in this essay imagines the female middle-class narrator in a scenario of encounters with a female subaltern figure—scenes of intense and volatile affective exchange that also complicate or refuse a traversal of the epistemological divide that separates them, even as the two subjects are brought uncomfortably near.⁷ In my readings of these scenes of intimacy, I take my cue from Jahan’s own theatrical intuitions as an activist playwright. In what follows, I read for an affective preoccupation that

emerges in her work with the angles and alignments of the public and partitioned urban spaces of her writing: the precise positioning of everything from the panoptic views, to the slant of the window, slightly askew, two buildings align at such an angle that two distinct story worlds come into contact through a series of forbidden glances. As diverse as they are subtle and imaginative, Jahan stages a brilliant series of accidental intimacies between the middle-class female narrator and the subaltern women of her stories. These anxious proximities catalyze the story's violent climax: houses aligned askew, a momentary stream of a torchlight in the forest, the angle of the car parked in the ravine, a split second misstep into the male compartment on the train, the accidental caress of a scarf on the leg of the enemy, a staring contest with a gaping hole where an eye used to be.

While fiercely committed to anti-colonial critique, scenes of intimacy are staged in Jahan's stories not between colonizer and colonized, but between the middle-class narrator and subaltern subject, foregrounding within the anti-colonial project a feminist critique of a masculinist anti-colonial nationalism, a double-edged critique that is a defining characteristic of much of the Progressive Writers literature. These scenes of intimacy are narrated through visceral reflex and reaction, the energetic life of the body's emotions and somatic response—the pull and push of attraction and repulsion, the accruing of aggressive and erotic energies in the moment of intimate contact with the “other.” These are embodied and affective dynamics that cannot simply be explained by a theory of colonial discourse, although intimately tied to its machinations of power and ideology. Jahan's socialist feminist aesthetics reveals a materialist ontology that anticipates the recent turn to “new” materialisms. The new materialisms center what Jane Bennett terms the “vitality” of matter (bodily and otherwise), a return to Spinozist monism, against a Cartesian theory that renders matter inert and instrumental to the human mind.⁸ Jahan's preoccupations with the materiality of bodies in intimate spaces narrate scenes of intimacy through the visceral forces that animate these bodies when they come into contact, and “move” them in ways that do not necessarily pass through conscious will or awareness (Coole and Frost 20). For Jahan, against a Cartesian understanding of the intellect as sole site of will and agency, there is an unruliness to the bodily reflex that must also be accounted for in any socialist project of feminist solidarity and decolonization.

The broader stakes of this essay lie in Jahan's contribution of a distinctive feminist analytic of colonial and decolonial affect. My readings linger in and draw forward a phenomenological register that runs throughout Jahan's writings.⁹ These readings conjugate anti-colonial Marxisms with a global history of ontologies that challenge mind-body hierarchies, and center the contagious energies of affective response. I share Kyla Tomkins' concern about the inability of much of new materialism to address the legacies of colonialism. I situate new materialism as one of many philosophical traditions and cosmologies

grappling with the “‘thingness’ of the human,” viewing the circulations and exchanges of consciousness and feeling as “shared social phenomena as they rise out of the substance of the world” (Tomkins, “On the Limits” 1). A study of colonial subjugation and racial capitalism demands a re-orientation of dominant body theories--the implicit reliance, for example, on the bounded or “emotively contained” subject of psychoanalysis, to site Teresa Brennan, or of ingrained Cartesian notions of bodily matter as inert, merely instrumentalized by the mind (*Transmission of Affect* 2). As Arun Saldanha writes, while “[t]he bodily differences we call race have been relegated to the discursive realm,” “racial difference emerges as many bodies in the real world align and comport themselves in certain ways, in certain places. Taking the embodiment of race seriously ... requires a radical shift in thinking” (*Psychedelic White* ix).

The materialism of Jahan’s literature invokes both historical materialism, the Marxism of the anti-colonial movement, as well as the materialist traditions thinking through the energetic properties of bodily matter: Freudian psychoanalysis, Spinozan monism, and phenomenology. Her materialist aesthetics also emerge from the dense internationalist exchange of philosophies and aesthetics: the hybridizing of European modernisms with Soviet realisms and Urdu literary forms, and of Western philosophical traditions (from existentialism to psychoanalysis) with Sufi metaphysics, and indigenous religious performance genres. As a result, the aesthetics and politics of Jahan’s literature necessitates a broadening of our understandings of the materialism at play in the internationalist political thought of this era.

I. Compartments: *Mera ek Safar* (One of My Journeys)

The figure of the subaltern that I trace in Jahan’s short stories emerges from the Indo-Soviet exchanges of aesthetic and cultural forms during the global era of decolonization. Organized by a Marxist historical teleology, the social realist novel in India—what Aamir Mufti terms the “national realist” novel—charts the utopic “ascension” of consciousness of the peasant or proletariat figure. The national realist novel became the literary form for the vast array of artistic visions of social transformation in the Progressive Writers movement. As Mufti writes,

The protocols of social realism, first formulated as a program at the Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934 and adopted as official Popular Front policy in 1935, undergo a transformation in being transplanted to a colonial setting. What the language of realist aesthetics now seeks to define is a specific relationship between writing and the nation so that it is more accurate to speak of *national realism* in this context. (*Enlightenment in the Colony* 183)

While many of the historical protagonists of these novels are subaltern figures—the prostitute, the untouchable, the orphan—the socialist-realist project of representing the subaltern was hotly debated among the

progressives, and many chose instead to write about middle-class subjects that mirrored their own experiences. Jahan's use of the subaltern figure in the Urdu short story form reveals a keen eye towards a feminist politics of representation that resonates suggestively with the Subaltern Studies debates of the late 1990s. The subaltern woman in Jahan's literature consistently emerges as a "predicament" rather than an identity, "the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed," in the words of Rosalind Morris in reference to Gayatri Spivak's definition of the subaltern (9). As Morris summarizes the force of Spivak's postcolonial feminist critique of Marxist political thought, she notes that the subaltern is a figure that "simultaneously performs, thematizes and theorizes" the predicaments of feminist and subaltern agency (Morris 2). It is for this reason that a reading of subaltern intimacy in Jahan's stories requires a particular attentiveness to her adept experimentation with literary form.

My readings of the subaltern center on Jahan's theatrical intuitions surrounding the spatial practices of social segregation and partition that dictate the prohibition of contact between genders, classes, castes, religious communities, and other such logics of alterity. My analysis focuses on a set of tense encounters between the subaltern woman and the middle-class female narrator. As Priyamvada Gopal writes, Jahan "came to see social transformation as a dynamic and dialectic process that grew out of encounters, both personal and cultural. These encounters are at the heart of some of her best stories, which are also explorations of the social geography of modernity in the emergent nation" (50).¹⁰ It is in these moments of encounter, I argue, that the subaltern, as epistemological predicament, emerges through the idiom of a feminist phenomenology.

Jahan's short story, *Mera ek Safar*, or "One of My Journeys" takes place within a crowded lower-class train compartment that quickly becomes a compressed hot-bed of communal antagonisms and aggression. "A battle between Hindus and Muslims was raging inside the compartment," the narrator tells us, and "these women from poor households seldom got a chance to fight [in] the streets" (136). An eruption of physical violence is sparked when the *dupatta* or scarf of a Muslim woman brushes against a Hindu woman, "her dupatta trailing behind her like a blanket of benevolence passing over the Hindu woman on the suitcase and another who sat behind her" (135). An angry exchange of words around the illicit contact quickly escalates into what the narrator describes as an "enflamed communal frenzy" (138). The story uses the cramped, overcrowded lower-class train car as a heightened scenario for exploring repressed and communal aggressions that surface when these women are brought so close together. A familiar scenario in postcolonial literature, from Aimé Césaire to Franz Fanon, this scene of forced intimacy on the train explores the volatile emotions triggered by a set of bodies that would never ordinarily go near one another brought into close proximity and contact.

Jahan's astute use of the gender-segregated train compartment as the theater of communal violence highlights the way in which the women come to subject each other to an aggressive gaze usually reserved for men (which justified the partitioned female train space in the first place). This scene of undesired contact is occasioned by the formal social segregation of the train: the partitioning of the lower classes from the upper classes, and the women from the men. Integral to this scenario is not only the compression of space that brings the two "camps" into intimate contact, but also the segregation from the male public sphere which enables this release of repressed female aggressions on one another in the absence of the male gaze—the guardians of gendered codes of propriety and respectability. The story's critique of communal antagonisms, what will later lead to national "partition," is refracted through the clever trope of the train compartment, threading through and layering classed, gendered, and communal logics of power and alterity.

The scenario of undesired intimacy in this short story is set into motion by the exchange of stares that motivates the tension between the women to its violent climax. For while it is the physical contact, when the clothing of the Muslim woman grazes the leg of the Hindu woman, that sparks the hysteria of the "communal frenzy," the mounting aggression is funneled through the exchanges of looks:

A strange wave of frenzy and fury coursed through the compartment. Each woman glared at the women of the other party, eyes popping with rage...now, they fell upon the woman with the nose-ring with combined fury. Help came from the other side too. Four or five women grappled with each other in that cramped space. (138-139)

This scene reveals a certain phenomenological preoccupation that characterizes all the experiments in subaltern intimacy that I examine in this essay; namely, how subjects inscribed in dynamics of alterity are "moved" to violence when brought into contact. "Things happen when people stare," writes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, for staring is about invading space, it is an aggressive and territorial act, and yet also, as she notes, an invitation of sorts (4). In opposition to theories of the gaze which focus on a simple victim-aggressor relationship, Garland-Thomson centrally argues that staring always demands a response, and therefore implicates both starrer and staree in a circuit of meaning and communication.¹¹

The women on the train are eventually drawn into contact through their mounting aggression funneled through the mutual act of staring. Sara Ahmed describes a similar force surrounding the magnetism of the desiring gaze: "to direct one's gaze and attention toward the other, as an object of desire...is not indifferent or neutral, or casual: we can redescribe 'towardness' as energetic." While Sara Ahmed writes on "towardness" as the energetic function of a subject drawn to an object of desire, Jahan's short story amplifies a certain threshold moment where the antagonism between the women shifts from the fear of intimacy and contact with the "other" to its peculiar magnetism, as the women "fall upon each other" in

a scene of unrestrained violence. This escalation of aggressive energies into physical violence governs the logic and narrative trajectory of nearly all of Jahan's experiments in rendering these scenes of intimacy with the "other."

This micro-instance of the larger wave of communal violence sweeping the country, however, is further narrated as a retrospective anecdote in the intimate tone of young college friends. Both Rakshanda Jalil and Gopal note the narrator's condescension directed at the lower-class women on the train. Gopal writes that the narrator observes with an "amused middle-class feminist smugness" (56), while Jalil writes that the lower-class women, in their communal antagonisms, "emerge as naïve, child-like pawns in a game they have watched others play but who have no real understanding or interest in its dynamics" (101). The story's narrator is a young college girl and the story opens in the form of a letter written by the fictional narrator, Zubeida, to a friend back at college. The light-hearted voice of the carefree narrator performed in the opening of the letter emerges in stark contrast to the scene of violence that she describes later.

Jahan's subaltern short stories are all rendered through an embedded set of narratives. The narrator of "Journeys" begins the story with a rather comic depiction of how she at first accidentally arrives in the train's male compartment before being forced to move into the lower-class women's train compartment, where she witnesses the violent episode: "Shakuntala, you girls have such a rotten sense of humor! You turned my watch back!" the letter begins playfully,

Only I know how I managed to catch that train! I hitched up my sari and ran all the way from the overhead bridge... You should have seen the railway staff – they were gaping at me with their mouths wide open... My hair was undone. You will say: What's new about that? Your hair is always all over the place! No but, seriously, yesterday I was in a real mess. (132)

The story of the communal antagonisms in the lower-class car is thus embedded within that of the middle-class female narrator, such that there emerges a striking juxtaposition between the two distinct story-worlds—that of Zubeida running to catch her train, and the communal violence among the women she witnesses in the lower-class compartment. The logic of one layer of the story to the other is then as follows: as Zubeida moves from the space of the train station to the lower-class car, she moves from the object of a disciplinary gaze, here the male gaze, to the subject of an elite classed gaze, as she mocks the triviality of the women fighting on the train. This is a key dimension of the self-consciousness of Jahan's play with form: we watch Zubeida subject the lower-class women to her own elitist gaze, "the detached and observing gaze of the feminist flâneuse," as she watches the lower-class women subject each other to their own aggressive staring (Gopal 56).

As Ulka Anjaria argues of the realist aesthetics in India during this era of nationalism, "against common perceptions, realism in the colony is

highly metatextual, founded on variegated textual fields and constituted not by ideological certainties but by contradictions, conflicts, and profound ambivalence as to the nature of the real world being represented, and the novel's ability to represent it" (5). Embedded within each of Jahan's short stories is this metatextuality, this self-conscious staging of the middle-class female narrator brought into unwanted contact with the world of the female lower classes. What I wish to draw into focus is how one story disrupts the other. The narrative hinge between the two story-worlds, what one has to do with the other in "One of My Journeys," I would argue, is the economy of staring that motivates the climax of this short story. For, in comically relaying to her friends the debacle that lands her in the wrong train compartment in the first place, there is an important detail embedded in her retelling. Zubeida describes the spectacle that she herself becomes in the station to an audience of gaping and jeering men: "I hitched up my Sari, they were *gaping* at me, I *looked neither left nor right*," she writes (my emphasis).

Who sees, who stares, at whom, and from what perspective, what angle, what *orientation*? Sara Ahmed draws out and amplifies the epistemological stakes of what it means to be an "oriented" subject in Western phenomenology, and its normative implications for the deviant (queer, female, colonized, raced, subaltern) subject in a way that carries, as we will find, a suggestive resonance with Jahan's subaltern intimacies. Within Jahan's layered scene of anxious intimacies on the train, refracted though power differentials of class, gender, and communal difference, questions of perspective and proximity are underwritten by phenomenological questions of orientation: from what perspective does the object of visibility, here the subaltern subject, come "within reach"—how can she become graspable, knowable?¹² These are the problematics at the center of Marxist revolutionary projects. This relationship between proximity and the knowability of the subaltern other is what underwrites the drama of interiority within each scenario of subaltern intimacy that I examine in this essay.

Here the narrator's condescension at the women fighting in the compartment is rendered ironic, as she moves from the object of the (male) gaze in the public sphere of the train station, to the subject of a middle-class gaze aimed at the spectacle of the woman.¹³ Jahan's short stories are all characterized by this uncanny doubling: one dimension of the story in an inner fold echoes or mirrors an analogous one in the outer fold, in a way that estranges or dis-orients the narrator's narrative frame. In this way, the narrator's uncomfortable proximity to the women in the lower-class car in "Journeys" serves as a jarring disruption to her naïve narrative world and consciousness.

Formally, there are always two competing narrative worlds in Jahan's short stories. These narrative worlds (belonging to the narrator and subaltern, respectively) are hermeneutically sealed off from the other, and always rendered through a peculiar and striking juxtaposition. While the lower-class women in this particular story are not voiceless subaltern

figures, as they are in Jahan's later stories, Jahan's rendering of the lower-class figure in "Journeys" as well as her other stories echoes Subaltern Studies' definitions of subalternity as an epistemological sphere, a "life-world" in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, defined in opposition and negation to that of the bourgeois intellectual or the "elite."¹⁴ Here these spheres are quite literally compartmentalized within spatial politics of the train. My interest is in how Jahan's depiction of the subaltern uncomfortably folds into the consciousness of the narrator—one story-world sits restlessly within the other within her formal play.¹⁵ This relationship between the intimacy with and the knowability of the subaltern further lie at the heart of two of Jahan's short stories, *Woh* and *Sauda*, that center on the classic subaltern figure of the prostitute.

II. Inversion: *Woh* (That One)

What little has been written on Rashid Jahan centers on her remarkable short story, "That One" (*Woh*), which depicts an encounter between a young female doctor and a prostitute in her clinic who suffers from a venereal disease.¹⁶ Jahan centers in "That One" on the gendered subaltern figure of the prostitute.¹⁷ A young middle-class woman, newly graduated from college working at a women's school, narrates that story; she closely resembles Jahan, who herself was a part of a generation of middle-class Muslim women trained in Western gynecology by the British colonial government. As Rakshanda Jalil writes, "[t]he action in "*Woh*" takes place in a newly-opened space, a public space, where women from different social classes meet, an encounter that was inconceivable even a decade earlier" (92). One day, the narrator encounters a woman, one she finds out is a prostitute, who comes to the clinic for treatment. The prostitute's face has become so disfigured as a result of venereal disease that the others working in the clinic revile in disgust when they see her; they refuse to touch the chair she sits on, and repeatedly curse her repulsive and depraved presence:

I first met her at the hospital ... She had come there for treatment...Seeing her the other women turned away. Even the doctor's eyes strained shut in disgust. I felt repulsed too, but somehow managed to look straight at her and smile. She smiled back, or at least I thought she tried to—it was difficult to tell...she had no nose. Two raw, gaping holes stood in its place. She had also lost one of her eyes. *To see with the one she had to crane her neck around* (119, my emphasis)

The peculiar angle with which the prostitute must turn or orient in order to "see" is a poignant detail in this sparse, short story—a certain skewed or slanted perspective that becomes a central trope of the story. The narrator's revulsion becomes the heightened affective idiom through which the story stages the threat of the classed "other," and the crisis of consciousness occasioned by this scene of contact. Later, this nameless, faceless woman, referred to by the others in disgust as *woh* or "that one,"

finds the narrator at her workplace, a women's school. Her revulsion not only emerges from the disfigured woman's appearance, but also from the prospect of touch—the fear of proximity and “pollution.” “We should observe purdah from that vile creature, one fat old teacher said acidly” (119), the narrator tells us, and, similarly, “[n]o-body would sit in the chair she used. I don't blame them. It wasn't their fault. She looked so revolting. I couldn't bring myself to touch the chair either” (120). In other words, the aversive reflex or energetic force of the intimacy is not simply motivated through the optic register in this scenario, but through the prospect, real or imagined, of physical touch. For German phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai, intimacy is the central feature of the disgusting, for it is the threat of contact with the toxic or dangerous substance that triggers the aversive response.¹⁸

The story, in fact, concludes by heightening the revulsion already associated with the liquids of her interiors, oozing, running out of her face, when “that one” blows her nose and wipes her fingers on the wall, pushing the tense, underlying threat of violence that builds throughout the story over the threshold. Suggestively, it is the sweeper woman who works in the school who loses all control and begins senselessly beating the woman: “You bastard you whore, who do you think you are? Yesterday you were loitering at the street corner, and today as your flesh falls rotting apart, you parade here like a lady!” (121). The story focalizes this act of wiping her mucus on the wall as that which incites the sweeper woman's seemingly uncontrollable moment of physical aggression directed towards the prostitute. A series of both real and imagined intimacies and anxious proximities are at play here. This disgust—the visceral reaction that sets the sweeper woman upon the unbounded body of the prostitute—invokes a series of metonymic logics that traffic between the physical and moral reflexes of disgust. The reflex of disgust is set off by the bodily fluids leaking out of the face of “that one,” later wiped on the wall—unspeakable sexual textures that invoke both the prostitute's social depravity and exploitation, her sex “work.” The fear of intimacy with the prostitute operates through both vision and touch.

Despite the narrator's disgust, an intimate daily ritual begins: “that one” visits the narrator at the school, says nothing, and presents her with a flower, which the narrator, holding back her disgust, tucks behind her ear. Gopal astutely reads these ritual encounters as “an inverted romance with [the narrator's] own emotional existence at the centre... there is only a hint of irony here as the narrative draws on the high sentimental rhetoric of the ‘*afsana*’ or romantic short story that was especially popular with a female readership” (44). This ritual unfolds a peculiar set of recursive intimate gestures in their daily encounters, which recalls Lauren Berlant's provocative meditation on intimacy: “to intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures. ... But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way” (281). And yet, despite these aspirations for a shared story that could “turn out” a different

way, the prostitute's daily visits bring the narrator to a state of panic. The women that work at the narrator's school become increasingly indignant regarding "that one's" debauched presence at the school, and begin to ridicule and condemn the narrator. The unrelenting presence of the subaltern figure in the story thrusts the narrator into a stream of self-reflection and speculation:

I felt awkward and humiliated, I was being made into an object of humiliation in school. Still, whenever she placed a flower before me, I would tuck it into my hair and her face would once again crease into that horrifying smile. Why does she stare at me like this? Who is she? What has she been? Where did she come from? How has she become like this? (121)

The privileged gaze here is inverted; the entire scenario somehow turned "inside out." "There she sat, just gazing at me with *that crooked eye* and that ghastly noseless face," the narrator declares, "Sometimes I thought I saw her eye fill. What was passing through her mind?" (120, my emphasis). Highlighted over and over again in the grotesque imagery of the subaltern figure, her "crooked eye," her gaze a-slant, is that we quite literally "see" her insides, but have no access to her interiority.¹⁹ This frustrates the narrator, making impossible the grounds for feminist empathy, and at the same time granting an unwanted access to the nameless woman's biological "insides." With the erosion of the subaltern subject's face, Jahan denies any idealized revolutionary feminist *interface* between the narrator and "that one." Through the use of this self-conscious move in the embedded narrative of "That One," the narrator is oriented to the figure of the prostitute in a clever logic of inversion.

Jahan centers the narrative crisis on the young and naively idealistic doctor struggling to find compassion amidst her revulsion for the nameless, faceless prostitute. As Priyamvada Gopal writes, "That One" ought to be read as a reflection and auto-critique surrounding the failure or limits of empathy and female solidarity: "The liberal—and Gandhian—fiction of reciprocity and mutual understanding across class boundaries within the emergent nation is one that the narrative participates in even as it recognizes its impossibility under the circumstances" (46). We may read this, in fact, as the failed project of recuperating the subaltern more broadly. The figure of the subaltern in these scenarios of forced intimacy comes into view as a predicament that calls for an ethics of progressive readings and practices of feminist solidarity that are "attentive to the aporetic structure of 'knowing' in the encounter with the other" (Morris 9).

Through this inversion, Jahan disrupts and radically disorients, I would argue, a feminist desire for access to the interiority of subaltern otherness, a knowability that we may call empathy between the feminist intellectual and her subaltern subject. Such a critique once again resonates with Spivak's famous intervention into the Marxist projects of recuperating the agency of the subaltern, one that redefines the subaltern

not as an identity, but as a cusp or “limit of representation,” in the words of David Lloyd.²⁰ Just as the divided spheres of subaltern and elite are quite literally partitioned in train compartments in “Journeys,” the prostitute emerges as an epistemological horizon or limit that is always just out of reach or “grasp,” to draw on the phenomenological concept, of the middle-class feminist consciousness. If Jahan stages an impossibility of feminist empathy here, I ask, what is the political investment in this uneasy intimacy with the subaltern subject of this feminist imaginary? Why is the subaltern brought “near,” into proximity, while refusing to render her transparent or fully knowable to the elite narrator (and reader)? It is with this question that I turn to the final short story, *Sauda*.

III. Substitution and Exchange: *Sauda* (The Deal)

In turning to *Sauda*, or “The Deal,” I magnify a phenomenological valence of subaltern intimacy that runs throughout her stories: inscribed in the concepts of nearness and proximity are questions of resemblance, likeness, familiarity. The phenomenological questions of orientation explored in the previous two stories contour the aesthetics of “*Sauda*”: images of structures and shapes, postures and positions, lines and equations, proliferate throughout the aesthetics of her story, a metatextual foregrounding of her own play with slanted alignments and “oblique angles”—her uncomfortable positioning of the reader in relation to the subaltern she desires to know (Ahmed “Not Without Ambivalence” 115). The story of *Sauda*, I argue, is particularly invested in working out a set of relations between nearness and familiarities, and approximations and resemblance, through her narrative manipulation of not only space but time.

Like the previous short stories, the narrative of “*Sauda*” or “The Deal” is also told through a set of uncanny juxtapositions and doubling between the distinct story-worlds of the elite (feminist) narrator and the subaltern. In the case of “The Deal,” this juxtaposition emerges as a memory within a memory—remembering a moment of remembering—that forms a complex link between the story of the elite and the subaltern. “I was miles away from myself that night,” the young female narrator tells us at the beginning of the story, as she sits alone in a parked car, a phrase that repeats like a refrain throughout the narrative. Although the narrator of “The Deal” appears alone in the privatized space of a car, in contrast to the cramped train space in “Journeys,” the question of proximity and contact with the subaltern similarly remains integral to the scenario. This distance from herself, this moment of disembodiment, conjures up her past memories. As the story unfolds, that distance from the narrator’s self creates other kinds of unforeseen proximities, and other moments of unscripted intimacies.

Sauda opens with the narrator remembering herself as a young and reckless college girl taking a drive with some friends. She finds herself at a spot in the forest that triggers an intense memory of a past lover. “Memory is a strange thing. It troubles you at the oddest of times. Whenever I take that road, old conversations, faces, the same old memories come alive,” the narrator begins. The narrator tells us that she remains in the parked car while her friends go for a walk, overcome by her memory of an impassioned rendezvous with her lover in that very spot in the woods. The narrator’s romantic and melancholic musings are suddenly disrupted by a disturbing scene to which she accidentally bears witness.

The narrator’s vantage point, again, becomes crucial for creating a momentary opening between the two story-worlds. As Ahmed writes, “orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others” (*Queer Phenomenology* 3). The car is parked at such an angle that the narrator gains a privileged view without herself being seen, as she becomes the reluctant witness to the scene of prostitute at work. One momentary flash of a torchlight, as the narrator’s friends attempt to make their way back to the car, reveals the naked body of one of the men who hides his face, ironically, beneath the *burqua* of the prostitute. The moment of revelation is then, of course, not of the subaltern, but the hypocrisy of respectability (*sharafat*), rendered through the inverted image of the man beneath the *burqua* as his naked body gleams under that momentary stream of light. The story ends with the sound of the prostitute’s laughter, “peals and peals” of “dead laughter,” as her patron dives beneath her veil, a suggestive albeit opaque trace of the subaltern’s interiority—the hollow timbre of her voice and its echo.

In this instance, then, the two layers of the story, the world of the narrator and the world of the subaltern, are once again cleverly linked through the metatextuality of Jahan’s short story form: her (remembering) experiencing sex in the same place, she witnesses the subaltern’s sexual exploitation. Here the question of subaltern intimacy focuses sex and power, but it is the memory that brings these two worlds “near” and estranges the conditions of their proximity. The precision of Jahan’s staging in the story once again draws into unnerving juxtaposition the world of the elite with that of the female subaltern, as that place within the forest becomes the pivot between her memories of sexual intimacy and her witnessing of the raw sexual transaction of the prostitute. The narrator is forced to reconcile her own scenario of transaction, the nature of the “deal” in which she is participating, with that of the prostitute.

In turning to Jahan’s short story, *Sauda*, I want to further interrogate the geometrics of this uncanny doubling at the level of form: how she so unnervingly folds (or aligns) one story-world within another as tactics of dis-orientation, in the phenomenological sense. For, this juxtaposition between elite and subaltern worlds produces a peculiar relationship between one story-world and another, a skewed alignment that emerges in all of Jahan’s feminist experiments with the representation of the subaltern. If in “One of My Journeys,” Jahan plays with compartments and

partitions as a metatextual device, and in “That One” there is a similar self-conscious play with inversion, in “The Deal,” it is with exchange and substitution. The theme of distance and proximity in *Sauda* is refracted through a Marxist play with substitution and exchange value, invoked in the transaction or “sale” of the story’s title. In the service of this point, I turn to the orientations of this story: Jahan’s play with equations, substitution, and exchange. For example, the mounting aggression that structures all of Jahan’s stories emerges in “The Deal” through the mounting sexual frustration of the men who have to wait, due to the uneven distribution of women to men: “there were 3 women and 5 or 6 men,” she tells us, so “obviously someone would have to wait” (158). This play with the logic of supply and demand here invokes the economy of sex and desire. The mathematics of this equation cleverly reworks a detail from the narrator’s own story in the frame narrative, another dimension of “the deal,” drawing the two story worlds in parallel, but skewing the alignment. This uneven distribution of men to women becomes a variation of “the four women and Prakash” who went out for a drive that night during which the narrator finds herself in the car alone, a subtle gesture towards the competition between the narrator and the other women to “make him [Prakash] simmer” (156).

A particularly poignant deployment of this logic of exchange emerges in the narrator’s romantic musings. Part of the naïve romantic tapestry of the narrator’s memory includes, interestingly enough, her encounter with this same lover in the arms of another woman:

Again the same night, the same face bent with passion and love was ablaze before my eyes. But this time that woman was not me. There is movement even in love as there is in life; it is not a dead thing that can be buried in one place. When it shifts its position during its dance, it becomes stronger, more intense, more beautiful than before. Yet, it leaves memories in its place, which creates restlessness and pain with the passage of time. But what is life without this? (157)

Jahan draws out the mathematics of the transaction between the narrator and her lover, caught in the arms of another woman, making salient the variable in this equation. An exercise in exchange value, she plays with the logic of substitution, this scenario that isolates and produces the female as the variable to be rendered exchangeable. Jahan, however, narrates the scene through the particular shapes these bodies take—their postures and their poses, the ones that sediment and the ones that shift—recalling Sara Ahmed’s words that bodies “tend toward some objects more than others, given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary; they are effects of the repetition of tending toward” (553). Citing Judith Butler, Ahmed writes that it is “precisely how phenomenology exposes the sedimentation of history in the repetition of bodily action that makes it a useful resource for feminism” (“Towards a Queer Phenomenology” 553). Jahan not only disrupts this moment of poetic musing on the nature of love’s (ex)changeability that ascends into a high romantic poetic form, but renders it ironic in the scene of prostitution that follows.

One moment the narrator is lost in poetic meditations of her past lover and the nature of love lost, and the next she is jolted out of her thoughts by a car that suddenly pulls up in front of her. A series of drunken men and their burqa-clad prostitutes emerge, and the narrator witnesses the disturbing transactions that take place between a set of prostitutes and a number of well-respected men of the city—this is the *sauda*, which can be translated as the “sale” or the “deal,” to which the title refers. The narrator’s encounter with the subaltern and her world, as we have seen in the previous short stories, disrupts the romanticized and aestheticized visual landscape on which the narrator projects her sensual memories and naïve romantic musings. Here, in an uncanny series of doublings that look more like a series of distorted fun-house mirroring, refracted through the idiom of exchange and substitution, Jahan’s narrative manipulation of witness and memory forces the narrator into a confrontation with how one sexual transaction “squares” or aligns with the others.

The narrator (and reader by proxy) are thus left with a series of questions surrounding the nature of this jarring juxtaposition: what is the relationship between the story-world of the narrator, and that of the subaltern that disrupts the landscape of her romantic memories? How do we make sense of this relationship between the narrator’s experience of sex, or her memory of it, and the sex of the prostitute that she witnesses? What is the difference between the narrator’s sexual consent and the raw coercion of the prostitute? To what extent does one come to resemble or approximate the other?²¹

Jahan’s formalism reveals an intricate architecture in its engagement with the gendered and classed politics of space, staging these scenarios of subaltern intimacy through phenomenological alignments. This draws the elite narrator into a relationship of proximity, nearness, of closeness, that simultaneously highlights the difference and the gap, the apertures and the remainders in their oblique alignment with the subaltern subject. Jahan’s refusal of a feminist politics of empathy between the narrator and the subaltern in *Sauda* involves an orientation of the world of the subaltern and elite through a formal mirroring that never quite aligns. Precisely when we think that Jahan may be drawing the two story-worlds into equivalence, where we may gain access into the world of the subaltern, it is against this logic of equivalence (that the body of the middle-class woman could be exchangeable for that of the prostitute) that the story-worlds of the subaltern and the narrator emerge as utterly incommensurate.

These asymmetries, slanted alignments and oblique angles of Jahan’s “queer” phenomenology, to borrow from Sara Ahmed, produce the very conditions of subaltern intimacy in each short story. These scenarios refuse access into subaltern interiority, and instead draw the middle-class narrator (and reader) into a moment of radical affective disorientation through which she is (and we are) forced to confront the thwarted political desire to access the subaltern other. As Ahmed writes, “such sideways

moments may generate new possibilities, or they may not” (19). These encounters “off the grid” become the theater for visceral bodily reactions ignited by the proximity and threat of “the other” that drive the mounting tension of each short story, through an energetic economy of staring and touching, to its violent catharsis. To return to the narrator of “The Deal,” alone in the car, who wistfully remembers in sensuous detail the affair with her past lover, Jahan writes: “One completely loses control the moment one sets eyes on the other person” (156). She tells us that, “[b]odily proximity creates a sensation like a flash of lightening, a quicksilver madness, a heat that courses through and causes a state when one has lost all control over oneself” (156). Whether in the idiom of fear or disgust, disdain or desire, this is the visceral response that Jahan seeks to elicit within each of her scenarios of intimacy: the involuntary loss of corporeal control that occurs when bodies, otherwise prohibited or partitioned from one another, draw near or touch. The moment of intimacy with the “other,” where the aversive reflex gives way to what looks like the “towardness” of desire—where fear of touch becomes the drive towards the other in violent contact, the push becomes the pull, the (aggressive) looking gives way to (violent) touching—characterizes the volatile climax of each experiment in subaltern intimacy.

This dynamic of attraction and repulsion in “The Deal” holds a suggestive parallel with the violence in the train compartment in “One of my Journeys”: the rising tension as “each woman glared at the women of the other party, eyes popping with rage,” eyes locked, bodies taut in suspension, rage and hatred coursing through the compartment, before the antagonists give in to its peculiar magnetic force and collapse upon each other. Similarly, in “That One,” the aversive reflex and energetic repulsion of disgust is set off by the grotesque appearance of “that one,” and yet in the climactic moment where she smears her mucus on the wall, the disgust of the sweeper woman provokes such rage that she gives in to the peculiar pull of the disgusting object, a repulsion that, as we have seen in the other stories, ends in the violent collapse of the bodies onto each other.²² Jahan’s queer phenomenology reworks the “towardness” of desire such that the magnetic pull is always already inscribed in the fear of the “other” and vice versa. This dialectic of fear and desire is, in fact, a central feature of Edward Said’s theories of colonial “alterity” in his classic *Orientalism*. While this dialectic is often theorized through a psychoanalytic idiom of drives and repression, Jahan theorizes it through the energetic charge of these scenes of intimacy.

Attending to each story’s intimate escalations, from the moments of looking to those of touching, we find that all of these scenes linger and pause at the moment of tension and suspension before the moment of intimate contact takes place—a caesura of sorts, embedded in each scenario of intimacy.²³ This suspended moment seems to house these polar forces of desire and aggression—it is the moment before the looking turns to touching, that the aggressive looking *invites* the aggressive touching—which moves us from the moment of tense anticipation to cathartic

release. It is in this moment where the push becomes the pull, or vice versa, that Jahan seems to posit this space of possibility for a shared story that could, perhaps, turn out a different way, a moment of rupture or rerouting of the seemingly inevitable violent drive of intimate encounters. It is perhaps from within these volatile visceral reflexes, where habits of mind, or states of consciousness, are naturalized in the “tendencies” and habituation of bodily reflex, that they may be unlearned or disrupted from within.

As Gopal writes, Jahan’s stories “examine the ways in which women’s relationships to their bodies, to others and to space shift in response to historical and social exigencies. It is as these shifts take place that possibilities for a more radical transformation of interpersonal and social relations emerge” (50). To posit a politics of intimacy over empathy, I want to argue, is to center this volatility and vitality of the emotive reflex and its dialectical force (fear and desire) when it is brought into precarious proximity with its conditioned “other”—here the subaltern figure within the Marxist feminist political imaginary of Jahan’s stories. Decolonization here, and the project of feminist solidarity, then, calls for an epistemological overhaul that cannot simply be attained through an intellectual exercise in empathy, but calls for some other kind of affective labor altogether. Jahan’s phenomenology provides a provocative materialist reconsideration of colonial and gendered violence and aggression that centers the unruly, energetic life of the body’s conditioned visceral response. It is also from within this visceral charge, which affectively tethers these subjects inscribed in logics of alterity, that the very possibility of decolonization is imagined.

Notes

1. See Rakhshanda Jalil’s “A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan” (2014), and Attia Abid’s “Dr. Rasheed Jahan: Selected Short Stories and Plays” (2010).

2. See Rakhshanda Jalil’s recently published *A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan*.

3. In addition to the study of South Asian literatures and feminisms, Jahan’s translated literatures are an important contribution to the debates and canons of postcolonial studies and transnational feminisms that have been largely dominated by Anglophone literatures, the global history of social realism, as well as the continued relevance of Marxisms and anti-colonial internationalism, particularly for feminism.

4. As Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel write critically of the eurocentrism of the contemporary “turn” to affect: “Affect, in however

generative a guise, turns into a transposable logic or schema traipsing along from the United States to elsewhere” (“Area Impossible” 156).

5. As Priyamvada Gopal writes, “the dismissal of the Progressive legacy in some influential quarters resonates with a wider disavowal of Marxism within literary theory and postcolonial studies as ‘economistic’ or ‘deterministic,’ their literature marked by accusations of ‘political orthodoxy and aesthetic tyranny’” (Gopal 4).

6. See also Narasimhaiah, Mukherjee, Iyengar, Trivedi, Paranjape, Bhatia, Jalil, and Trivedi. For more on the history of the Progressive Writers Association, see Gopal (2005), Pradan (1979), Coppola (1988), Ahmed (2009), and Zaheer (2006).

7. As Ann Stoler writes of the importance of intimacy studies for postcolonial theory:

[d]omains of the intimate...are strategic for exploring two related but often discretely understood sources of colonial control: one that works through the requisition of bodies—those of both colonials and colonized—and a second that molds new ‘structures of feeling’—new habits of heart and mind that enable those categories of difference and subject formation (2).

8. See Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*.

9. For a fuller account of this materialism that runs through the Progressive literature of this era, see Neetu Khanna *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization* (forthcoming with Duke University Press 2019).

10. Gopal offers one of the most insightful scholarly accounts of Jahan’s literary achievements by focusing her feminist renderings with the modern “habitus” in decolonizing India, and as such, remains an important interlocutor for this essay. See “Gender, Modernity, and the Politics of Space: Rashid Jahan, Angareywali” in *Literary Radicalism in India*.

11. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Staring: Why We Look*.

12. See Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*.

13. In contrast to Gopal who sees the irony and narrative condescension of the narrator as “doing little to distance the narrator from her own classed and internalized misogyny” I note the metatextuality of the politics of the gaze. I read this as key to the story’s auto-critique in keeping with Jahan’s other stories, whereas Gopal sees “Journeys” as more of an exception, indicative of Jahan’s earlier work (Gopal 56).

14. See *The Subaltern Studies Reader* (edited by Guha), and *Selected Subaltern Studies* (ed. Guha and Spivak).

15. See Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*.

16. The short story is anthologized in Tharu and Lalita's (eds.) *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. To the Present*, and discussed at great length in Gopal's *Literary Radicalism in India*.

17. See Aamir Mufti's *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* for an important discussion of the socialist-realist form as transplanted into the Indian colonies, as well as the figure of the prostitute and courtesan in Indian and Urdu literatures.

18. Kolnai writes, "the principal feature of the disgusting" is its "somehow obtrusive clinging to the subject" (Kolnai 41).

19. As Priyamvada Gopal writes of one of Jahan's earlier short stories, "Behind the Veil":

Jahan does not distinguish clearly between the different uses of the word 'andar' or 'inside', which could refer to the inner (female) quarters of the home and/or the inner recesses of the female body. But this vantage point is not enough, even when combined with professional scientific and medical knowledge; 'access' does not necessarily entail 'understanding' (42).

20. As Lloyd writes:

the subaltern marks the limit of the nation-state's capacity for representation, if, indeed, it marks a limit to representation in every way, the problem of the representation of the subaltern leads postcolonial theory into a virtual aporia with regard to thinking practical alternatives to nationalist notions of decolonization (4).

21. As we are reminded in the very definition of intimacy, the verb, "to intimate" carries the meaning of "closely acquainted, very familiar." For more on this, see Sara Ahmed in "Not Without Ambivalence" (Interview) in the special issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, "Postcolonial Intimacies: Gatherings, Disruptions, Departures" (2013).

22. For more on the dialectic of desire and disgust in the fiction of Jahan and her student, Ismat Chughtai, see "Compulsion" in *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization*.

23. This suspended moment or pause, is, in fact, written into the stage directions of the play Jahan wrote for 'Angarey,' "Behind the Veil." I am

also here invoking Fred Moten's notion of the caesura, see *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.

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