

Research paper

Margins Rewritten: Pasmanda Feminism and the Politics of Disappearance in Sajjad Zaheer's Dulari

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ABSTRACT

Sajjad Zaheer's short story "Dulari," first published in the 1932 Urdu anthology *Angarey* and later translated into English by Vibha S. Chauhan and Khalid Alv (2014), serves as a critical literary site for examining caste, gender, and religious marginalization within Indian Muslim communities. Situated in contrast to the framework of the 1930s Progressive Writers' Movement (PMW), the narrative offers a rare glimpse into the lived realities of Dalit Muslim women, particularly those from Arzaal communities such as the Mehtar, Bhangi, Halalkhor, and Lalbegi. This article engages with "Dulari" through the lens of Pasmanda feminism to foreground a discourse that has long been eclipsed by dominant Hindu-centric frameworks in feminist and Dalit literary studies. In doing so, it challenges the caste-blindness of liberal feminism and the frequent Hindu-centrism of Dalit feminism by focusing on intra-Muslim caste hierarchies and their gendered implications. The reading draws on Anupama Rao's theory of "embodied inequality" and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "epistemic exclusion" to highlight how Dulari's suffering is compounded by caste-based discrimination, Islamophobia, and invisibility in both Muslim and feminist discourses. Zaheer's portrayal subtly critiques Ashraf elite morality while exposing the constrained modes of resistance available to the subaltern. Through this close literary and political reading, the article seeks to expand the South Asian caste literature canon and advocate for the inclusion of Pasmanda epistemologies within postcolonial and global feminist discourse. In doing so, it underscores the urgency of intersectional and decolonial solidarities that disrupt hegemonic narratives within both religious and literary traditions.

Keywords: intersectionality, Pasmanda feminism, Dalit Muslim women, religious marginalization, postcolonial feminist discourse

Sajjad Zaheer's short story "Dulari,"¹ originally written in Urdu in 1932 and translated into English by Vibha S. Chauhan and Khalid Alv in 2014², holds a unique position in South Asian literary history. Often situated within the broader framework of the 1930's Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) in British India as a radical critique of class and caste oppression amongst Muslim, Zaheer's narrative unsettles another buried axis of stratification: caste within Indian Muslim communities. While the PWM vocally condemned British imperialism and Hindu orthodoxy, its silence on caste, particularly among Indian Muslims remains a critical blind spot in both literary and

¹ As the name of the character and the title of the story is same, for clarity the paper will use "Dulari" (in quotation marks) for the story title and Dulari (without quotation marks) to denote the character. The same is used for the analysis. (Zaheer, 2014)

² The translated text doesn't have any page number; hence the first story "Summer Night" is considered as the page 1 and "Dulari" is page (8 to 13). (Zaheer, 2014)

political histories (Ahmed, 2009, p.24). In this context, “Dulari” positions itself as an anomaly: a story that challenges elite Muslim paternalism and critiques caste-like hierarchies well before the formal academic and socio-political articulation of Pasmanda politics.

Caste within Indian Muslim communities broadly manifests through a ‘tripartite hierarchical structure comprising the Ashraaf, Ajlaaf, and Arzaal categories’ (Ahmad, 2024; Government of India [GOI], 2006; Singh, 1994; Ansari, 1960). Imtiaz Ahmad in *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India* (1978) notes that ‘Ashraafs are considered Muslim elites internally stratified into Sayyads, Sheikhs, Mughals, and Pathans’ (Ahmad 2024, Ahmad 1978). Tausif Ahmad expands the same argument further by providing the detailed history, he says: *Sayyads claim direct descent from Prophet Muhammad and enjoy the highest prestige, akin to Brahmins in Hindu society. Sheikhs assert noble Central Asian lineage, while Mughals and Pathans, associated with warrior traditions and ancestry from Iran or Afghanistan, correspond to the Hindu Kshatriya varna. In contrast, Ajlaafs are descendants of Indian converts to Islam, often from occupationally lower Hindu castes such as carpenters and ironsmiths, regarded as inferior even within Muslim society* (Ahmad, 2024, pp.22–23).

In response to this marginality, Rafia Kazim in her essay “Who Will Speak for the Pasmanda Women?” (2021) highlights the rise of Dalit Muslim organizations such as ‘Eijaz Ali’s All India United Muslim Morcha (1993) and Ali Anwar’s All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (1998)’ emerged as a platform to represent Pasmanda identity (Kazim, 2021, p.82). She further explains that Pasmanda, a Persian term meaning “those left behind” was chosen as a political identifier to assert ethnic-racial legitimacy distinct from Hindu Dalits and possibly signal aspirational ties to Ashraaf identity. Britta Ohm in his paper, “The (im)possibility of a term: ‘Pasmanda’, the (non-) addressability of the state, and the ghettoization of communication” (2024) says: *‘Pasmanda’ is arguably the most explosive term that the more recent anti-caste discourse in India has produced. It is assembled from the Persian words pas (‘back’) and manda (‘left behind’), thus describing somebody ‘at the back’ (of society), who ‘has been left behind’* (Anwar, 2005, p. xii). *‘Pasmanda’ is akin to ‘Dalit’, a Sanskrit derivate meaning ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’, and a term that has been adopted—most prominently by B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit leader and architect of the Indian constitution—to rename India’s former ‘Untouchables’ so as to express their unjustifiable dehumanisation rather than their ‘impurity’* (Ohm, 2024; Ambedkar, 2014 [1936]; Kumar, 2019; Rao, 2009), (Ohm, 2024, pp.54-55).

By naming their condition, Pasmanda Muslims confront both Hindu and Muslim caste denials, challenging elite silences in religious and feminist discourse (Ansari, 2023; Kumar, 2019; Ambedkar, [1936] 2014; Rao, 2009). Yet even within Dalit and Islamic reformist spaces, Pasmanda women remain largely erased, obscured by assumptions of Islam’s innate egalitarianism (Kazim, 2021). “Dulari”, by portraying the servitude, silencing, and eventual resistance of a lower-caste Muslim girl in an elite household, interrupts this erasure and asserts a distinctive Dalit Muslim feminist identity.

In contrast to canonical anti-caste narratives like Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* (1997), Baburao Bagul’s, Laxman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya: The Branded* (1987), Kausalya Baisantry’s *Dohra Abhishap* (Twice Cursed) (1999), and Bama’s *Karukku* (1992)³, which includes Hindu caste and gender violence discussion in academia, the lived experiences of lower-caste Muslims remain unexplored. The assumption of Islam’s egalitarianism has obscured the persistence of caste within Muslim society, pushing Pasmanda voices to the periphery. “Dulari” challenges this exclusion by highlighting the embodied and epistemic violence faced by a lower-caste Muslim woman. This paper explores how “Dulari” anticipates Pasmanda feminist concerns through its portrayal of gendered labour, sexual vulnerability, and symbolic resistance, while revealing the moral paternalism of elite Muslim reformism. The argument advanced here is that “Dulari” articulates key concerns of Pasmanda feminism by showing how caste oppression operates through labour, silence, and gendered subjugation. Zaheer not only documents but critiques the Muslim caste hierarchy, exposing how elite reformists reproduce structural violence under the guise of care. Dulari’s final disappearance and the preceding accusatory gaze she casts, silent yet defiant, exemplify notion of ‘the subaltern’s refusal of speech under compromised conditions’ (Spivak, 1994). Her tension between erasure and resistance is also illuminated through ‘concept of embodied inequality’ (Rao, 2009), where caste marks the body through shame, labour, and surveillance.

The story is set in the women’s quarters of an affluent Ashraf household ruled by Begum Sahiba and Sheikh Nazim Ali. Dulari, an orphaned ‘londi’, has lived in servitude since childhood. The narrator naturalizes her lowly birth as “God’s design,” (Zaheer, 2014, p.11) reinforcing caste hierarchy within domestic life. Her existence is marked by quiet labor, isolation, and casual mockery, other maids often remind her, “I am not a londi like you” (Zaheer, 2014, p.8). As she matures, her beauty becomes both asset and curse. During the Shab-e-Barat festival, Kazim, the educated and modern-leaning elder son, follows her into a dark storeroom and sexually coerces her. The narration renders her submission with chilling detachment: “She shut her eyes and handed over her body and her heart to Kazim” (Zaheer, 2014, p.10). The absence of Dulari’s inner voice signals the erasure of consent,

³ Some of the canonical texts which have represented Dalit history. The list is only to show the contrast between representation of Hindu Dalit and Muslim Dalit in India.

demonstrating Zaheer's uneasy realism in which subaltern subjectivity is subsumed by patriarchal narrative authority. A year later, as Kazim's wedding approaches, Dulari vanishes, only to be found in the city's red-light district. When an old servant persuades her to return, the household anticipates praise for her "restoration." Instead, her return provokes communal shame: she enters veiled in a white chadar, her head bowed, and becomes the object of public humiliation. Begum Sahiba scolds her: "You shameless girl! So you have returned... the whole world is spitting at you," (Zaheer, 2014, p.12) reasserting caste and gender dominance under the guise of moral virtue. The family's spectatorship, deriving perverse satisfaction from her degradation, "The sight of an unchaste, insignificant creature being disgraced brought to them an exaggerated sense of their own superiority", further emphasizes systemic oppression. When Kazim appears with his bride, his feigned pity "Ammi, for God's sake, leave the unfortunate girl alone" (Zaheer, 2014, p.13), constitutes the final betrayal. Dulari's silent rise and defiant glare at the assembly function as the only moment of rupture: a non-verbal, affective resistance that shames the oppressors before she disappears once again.

To frame this analysis, the paper employs a multi-theoretical framework. First, Rao's theory of embodied inequality elucidates how caste is enacted through both physical and symbolic violence, marking bodies and behaviours within a rigid social hierarchy. Second, Spivak's (1994) concept of epistemic exclusion provides a critical lens to interpret Dulari's silence as a mode of subaltern resistance, a deliberate refusal to participate in hegemonic structures of knowledge and speech. Third, Pasmanda feminist Rafia Kazim which positions Dulari within a broader tradition of anti-caste Muslim critique that exposes the internal hierarchies and invisibilization within Muslim social contexts. In this light, Zaheer's text interrogates the intersections of sexual vulnerability, caste identity, and moral paternalism. Other than that, Susie Tharu's reflections on the gendered body (2021), further helps extend this discussion by revealing how silence and refusal can acquire subversive potential when situated against dominant epistemic frameworks. Contemporary scholarship on caste, affect, and embodiment, particularly by Gopal Guru, Joel Lee, Shailaja Paik, and K. Satyanarayana has further reinforced the need to locate subaltern experience within bodily and affective registers. Collectively, these perspectives illuminate how literature renders structural violence both perceptible and narratively legible, allowing "Dulari" to emerge as a site where caste, gender, and religion intersect to challenge dominant imaginaries of modernity and morality.

THEORETICAL ANCHORING

This paper draws upon an integrated theoretical framework that combines Anupama Rao's theory of embodied inequality, Gayatri Spivak's concept of epistemic exclusion, and the evolving discourse of Pasmanda feminism. Together, these frameworks allow for a critical re-reading of "Dulari" not merely as a tale of individual suffering but as a text that exposes and contests caste-based subjugation within Muslim social formations in Indian Society. Each framework offers a lens through which the narrative's formal and thematic strategies: bodily surveillance, silencing, servitude, and resistance can be interpreted as sites of caste-gender entanglement.

Embodied inequality (Rao, 2009)

Anupama Rao in her book *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (2009) provides a critical framework for understanding caste not merely as a social institution, but as an embodied, affective, and gendered condition. Rao critiques the conventional historiography of caste politics, which often centers on the figure of the male peasant and relies on binaries between anthropological community and Marxist conceptions of state power. She instead emphasizes how caste operates at the intersection of the experiential, political, and ethical, particularly through its inscription on the bodies of Dalit women (Rao, 2009). Rao's theorization of "embodied inequality" is particularly instructive in analysing literary representations such as Zaheer's story. In Rao's framework, the 'body of the Dalit woman' becomes a 'site of visible and invisible violence' which is often subjected to both material regulation and symbolic subjugation (Rao, 2009). Her analysis of how Brahminical patriarchy uses aesthetic and ritual codes to reinforce caste hierarchies is echoed in Dulari's dual existence: she is adorned for public rituals yet marked as abject in daily life through her clothing and demeanour. Rao identifies such contradictions as part of "a material structure of exploitation" legitimized through custom (Rao, 2009, p.11). Moreover, her emphasis on gendered bodily regulation as historically codified in Hindu legal texts such as the *Manusmriti*⁴, helps elucidate the mechanisms through which Dalit character like Dulari's autonomy is systematically constrained. Her gestures, movements, and clothing are tightly controlled, reflecting a broader social order that constructs Dalit women as both servile and sexually available. Rao's discussion of ritual servitude and normalized sexual violence finds resonance in Dulari's experience, particularly in moments such as Kazim's predatory gaze that makes her "tremble". These instances reflect what Rao terms the affective dimension of casteed violence, where fear, shame, and vulnerability are internalized yet politically meaningful. Rao further argues that violence

⁴ The *Manusmriti*, a Brahmanical legal text dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, has long served as a scriptural basis for caste and gender discrimination. G. Bühler (1886) *The Laws of Manu* (Vol. 25) Georg Bühler (translator), edited by Max Müller.

against Dalit women, whether in the form of sexual exploitation, economic deprivation, or political exclusion, forms a continuum that reinforces caste hierarchies. This continuum is starkly visible in *Dulari*'s status as a labouring body, denied dignity, protection, or legal standing. Rao's insight that "vulnerability is the condition of possibility for continued protection and legal recognition" (Rao, 2009, p.26) is particularly compelling in this context. In *Dulari*'s case, vulnerability is socially constructed and hyper-visible, yet it does not translate into any form of ethical or legal recognition. Importantly, Rao's framing allows for a reading of "*Dulari*" not merely as a narrative of victimhood but as a text of resistance. The protagonist's final act of silent defiance - her glare - can be understood as a rupture in the hegemonic script that governs her body. This aligns with Rao's conceptualization of the Dalit subaltern as a "dual figure" both stigmatized and revolutionary, who disrupts dominant narratives and gestures toward alternative modes of memory and resistance (Rao, 2009).

Epistemic exclusion (Spivak, 1994)

While Anupama Rao's work foregrounds how caste is inscribed on the body, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization of epistemic violence in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994) exposes how colonial and patriarchal knowledge systems erase the voices of subaltern women by denying them access to subjectivity and speech within dominant discourses. Spivak explores 'Epistemic Violence' as it is authoritarian and operates with an assumption that subaltern can automatically speak for themselves without mediation. She says: *Epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that other in its precarious Subject-ivity. It is well known that Foucault locates epistemic violence, a complete overhaul of the episteme, in the redefinition of sanity at the end of the European eighteenth century* (Spivak, 1994, p.76).

It is not only the physical marginalization of the oppressed but also the discursive annihilation of their capacity to be heard or known in their own terms. This insight is deeply relevant to "*Dulari*", where the titular character's silence is not incidental but structural - a symptom of epistemic violence. Although the narrative renders her visible, it withholds interiority and sustained speech. Her significant acts running away, trembling under Kazim's gaze as well as her final glare are performed wordlessly, underscoring Spivak's claim that "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (Spivak, 1994, p.103). She "has no reply" to casteist remarks, and even her climactic departure is carried out in silence, reaffirming Spivak's contention that "the subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item" (Spivak, 1994, p.104). Spivak further emphasizes that in the colonial production of knowledge, the subaltern is doubly excluded, from both historical narratives and political agency: the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the nonrepresenting intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved. The woman is doubly in shadow (Spivak, 1994, p.102).

Dulari embodies this shadowed position. While her labour and suffering are visible, her voice is absent, unrecorded, and untranslatable within the narrative's elite framework. Even in critique, the story's third-person omniscient narrator, an elite male position who mediates her experience, thus reproducing the very epistemic structures Spivak warns against. Spivak's framework challenges us to recognize that even radical or sympathetic literary representations may participate in epistemic violence by framing subaltern subjects through dominant codes. *Dulari*'s final glare, unspoken but charged with resistance, functions as a non-verbal rupture within this epistemic structure. As Spivak suggests, such moments are not clear speech acts but affective refusals, signalling a subjectivity that resists co-optation. Thus, reading "*Dulari*" through Spivak's lens of epistemic violence reveals how the story navigates the tension between representation and erasure. *Dulari*'s silence is not mere absence; it is the trace of violence inscribed by a social order that denies Dalit women the epistemic space to articulate their own realities.

Pasmada feminist praxis

Building on the preceding framework, a third and crucial axis emerges through Pasmada feminist thought - a relatively recent yet urgently necessary intervention within South Asian caste and gender studies. Rafia Kazim (2021) stands as one of the pioneering scholars to foreground Pasmada feminism, arguing that mainstream anti-caste and feminist discourses in India remain predominantly Hindu-centric and thus fail to account for the caste hierarchies and patriarchal control embedded within Indian Muslim communities. As Kazim (2021) incisively observes: *The category of Dalit too is not monolithic, nor is that of the category of Muslim. Both have their respective shares of internal fissures... and even within [Pasmadas], we have Dalit-Muslim-women or women who are Muslim but more Dalit* (Kazim, 2021, pp. 84-85).

This internal stratification is critical to the reading of "*Dulari*", especially through what Spivak terms "triple marginalization" - the simultaneous oppressions of caste, class, and gender borne most heavily by lower-caste Muslim women. Kazim emphasizes that: *The marginalization of these women is informed by the fact that there are several axes*

of discrimination (gender, caste, religion, community) that work simultaneously towards the systemic erasure of their existence as the most disempowered group, abandoned by their sororal subaltern groups (Kazim, 2021, p.85).

Such a framework is indispensable for analyzing story, as it reveals the layered exclusions that operate within the Ashraaf household. The character of Begum Sahiba, in particular, embodies what Ansari (2018) terms “benevolent hegemony”, a form of elite Ashraf paternalism that disguises domination as care. Her declaration that “the higher classes take care of the lower classes” (Zaheer, 2014, p.14) epitomizes this ideology, which justifies caste privilege through the language of moral duty, religious virtue, and guardianship. Yet, Pasmada feminism allows us to see beyond this paternalist veneer, uncovering the ideological function it serves in preserving caste power within Muslim society. Within this framework, Dulari herself is not merely a passive victim but a subject of strategic refusal. Her silence, bodily defiance, and eventual disappearance from the household align with what Pasmada activists such as Fatima Begum (2019) describe as “withdrawal as resistance”, a form of non-engagement that refuses to perform subjugation or plea for recognition on the oppressor’s terms. These acts resonate strongly with Spivak’s concept of “strategic silence” and Anupama Rao’s idea of “embodied critique,” where the body becomes the medium of dissent and agency in the absence of speech. Kazim poignantly asks: *Who will write for these women, and who will represent them? When will these women have their writers who would narrate the innumerable unaccounted stories of their lived experiences peppered with the instances of both oppression and resilience, exploitation, and celebrations? (Kazim, 2021, p.85).*

In this case, “Dulari” must be read not only as a narrative about the silence of a lower-caste Muslim woman but also as a symptomatic absence, a literary silence that reflects a larger discursive void. The story does not (and perhaps cannot) fully capture Dulari’s subjectivity, but her silences are far from empty; they constitute a radical non-performance of caste and gendered submission.

Intersectional synthesis

The combined application of these three frameworks - Rao, Spivak, and Pasmada feminism - offers a multidimensional lens through which to analyze “Dulari”. Rao helps us see how caste is etched onto Dulari’s body through labor and surveillance. Spivak elucidates how that same body is denied narrative agency. Pasmada feminism enables us to historicize these oppressions within the specific social context of Muslim caste patriarchy. Together, these frameworks enable a re-reading of “Dulari” as a proto-Pasmada feminist text. The story not only documents caste-based exploitation but also stages the limits of representation and the possibilities of non-verbal resistance. Dulari’s body, her silence, and her final disappearance are not narrative closures but political openings. They demand that readers and critics re-evaluate progressive and egalitarian claims - be they literary, religious, or social - through the lived realities of caste-subjugated Muslim women.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Progressive Writers’ Movement (PWM), formally founded in 1936, emerged from the controversy sparked by Angarey (1932), a collection of nine short stories and one play by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan, and Mahmuduzzafar. Denounced by Muslim clerics as “fuhash aur malhadanah kitaab” (pornographic and atheistic) and banned by the British under Section 295A for “outraging religious sentiments,” Angarey symbolized literary dissent against religious orthodoxy and colonial censorship. In a joint defence published in a newspaper, *The Leader* (5 April 1933), the authors insisted on their “right of free criticism and free expression.” This manifesto laid the groundwork for the PWM, which sought to mobilize literature as a tool for social transformation (Mahmud, 1996; Shingavi, 2013). However, historical records of the Angarey controversy show that the backlash was not uniformly distributed across all its stories. The most virulent attacks from clerics and the colonial state targeted narratives of female desire and those seen as directly blasphemous. In contrast, “Dulari,” with its quieter but arguably more profound critique of internal Muslim social hierarchies, appears to have been largely subsumed within the broader scandal. Its radical commentary on caste did not generate the same immediate public debate as the collection’s challenges to sexual and religious mores, a reception history that itself speaks to the very caste blind-spot the story sought to expose.

Influenced and inspired by Marxist ideology and Soviet realism, the PWM urged writers to depict working-class life and expose injustice. In Urdu literature, this meant challenging feudal and colonial structures. Yet, as Gopal Guru (2005) observes, the movement often privileged class over caste, masking internal hierarchies under the rhetoric of unity. Its radicalism was double-edged because even as it opposed external oppression, it overlooked Ashraf dominance within Muslim social structures (Ahmad, 2023). This is not to suggest an absolute absence of marginal women in their narratives; indeed, the PWM brought the lives of the poor and exploited to the literary forefront. However, the mode of this representation often deserves critical attention. Frequently, these characters were framed within a politics of pity, their suffering depicted to evoke sympathy from an elite, progressive

readership and to highlight the necessity of reformist intervention. The subaltern woman was often the silent object of the narrative, her agency secondary to the ideological awakening of the enlightened protagonist.

Aligning with the PWM's realist ethos, Zaheer's "Dulari" exposes caste and gender hierarchies within Muslim society. Characters such as Begum Sahiba, whose performative benevolence masks domination; Nazim Ali, whose moralizing gaze embodies patriarchal reformism; and Kazim, whose predation underscores casteed sexual economies, illustrate how elite reform can reproduce paternalism. Unlike typical PWM narratives that frame marginalized women as victims to be uplifted, "Dulari" resists closure: Dulari's final disappearance, silent and unresolved, disrupts expectations of moral redemption or reconciliation. The white chadar, initially a mark of shame, becomes an instrument of defiance what Dussel (2003) calls "epistemic resistance,"⁵ reclaiming meaning from dominant semiotic orders. "Dulari" critiques the PWM's Universalist rhetoric. As Sajjad (2014) and Ansari (2018) note, Muslim progressives often upheld Ashraf privilege while rhetorically espousing equality. By portraying subaltern Muslim womanhood, the story anticipates Pasmada politics: the theological masking of caste, the gendered erasure of Arzaal and Ajlaaf women, and the need for intersectional frameworks beyond class reductionism.

The translation of Angarey, including "Dulari", has revived this historically important collection, eliciting mixed but significant responses. Reviewers such as Semeen Ali (Setu Magazine) praised the translators for capturing the "anger, the frustration with the norms, as well as the atmosphere that the original created," helping non-Urdu readers grasp its historical and literary impact. Gillian Wright (Open Magazine) described the stories as "still stunning, fresh, engrossing and relevant," while noting occasional lapses in translation. Nadira Babbar's foreword provided valuable context for readers unfamiliar with Urdu literature. Reader feedback ranged from admiration to critique. The review by Megha R Mathur the Era I Lived In (magazine) hailed the translation as "sensitively and brilliantly" rendering issues of gender, sexuality, and social custom. Other critics and readers on Goodreads (website) found certain stories "incomprehensible," citing factual errors, missing pronouns, and insufficient footnotes for Hindustani or Urdu terms. Despite these issues, readers appreciated the boldness and historical relevance of the stories, recognizing their capacity to provoke reflection on societal inequities past and present.

ANALYSIS

Zaheer's "Dulari" opens with a declaration that lays bare the naturalized order of caste hierarchy within elite Muslim households: 'She was born into a class that was inferior not just to the bibis, the women in the family, but even to the maidservants. This was God's design' (Zaheer, 2014, p.8). This invocation of divine will immediately marks Dulari's subjugation as ontological, ordained by theology rather than socio-political structure. As Rao theorizes, this is an instance of embodied inequality - a structure in which caste is inscribed onto the body and framed as biologically inferior, permanently marked, and ideologically fixed. The divine framing: *Her childhood had been untroubled and carefree. She was born into a class that was inferior not just to the bibis, the women in the family, but even to the maidservants. This was god's design. He is the one who determines who should be esteemed and who humiliated. What was the point of grumbling about it all? Dulari, too, did not complain about the poverty* (Zaheer, 2014, p.8-9).

It makes resistance itself appear futile (Grimalt-Álvaro et al., 2025). Rao's insights on bodily regulation are evident in the narrative's contradictory portrayal of Dulari: 'but her clothes were usually filthy and her body smelled bad' (Zaheer, 2014, p.9), even as 'She was beautiful' (Zaheer, 2014, p.9). This paradox of eroticization and abjection is foundational to caste-gender violence. Dulari's "long limbs" and "curvy body" are sexualized through a voyeuristic narrative lens, but her bodily pollution and odour reinforce her social untouchability. Her condition is never ameliorated despite proximity to elite care, further complicated by elite moral performativity: 'after all, the people from the higher classes always take care of the ones from the lower classes!' (Zaheer, 2014, p.8).

This performance of benevolence is reiterated, 'Dulari had no complaints about food or clothes' (Zaheer, 2014, p.8). Here, elite narration neutralizes dissent by assigning passive contentment to the subaltern. Spivak's (1994) theory of epistemic exclusion explains how Dulari's voice is overwritten by the dominant discourse. The absence of genealogical or historical context that 'nobody knew who her parents were. Her universe had been limited to this house and its inhabitants', (Zaheer, 2014, p.8) removes Dulari from historical specificity. This is quite similar to the colonized subjects, which as per European norms had no history. Hence, it makes Dulari more vulnerable and subjected to be colonized. Spivak notes, 'If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is ever more deeply in shadow' (Spivak, 1994, p.83). She exists purely as an object of elite utility. Further, her social alienation is also symbolized by the developmental divergence from her childhood friend: *But as they grew older, the distance between them widened with each passing year. Choti Sahibzaadi was from a*

⁵Dussel discusses the concept of "epistemic resistance" primarily in his work *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, where he critiques Eurocentric epistemology and advocates for knowledge systems rooted in the lived experiences and histories of the oppressed (Dussel, 2003).

respectable family; her time was well utilized in reading, writing and stitching. Dulari would dust the rooms, do the dishes, fill up and store water for use (Zaheer, 2014, p.9).

The moral and educational ideals of this elite household, which sharply distinguish the "respectable" family women from servants like Dulari, reflect the broader trends of Muslim elite self-fashioning in 20th century South Asia, a history meticulously traced by scholars like Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2018). Dulari's servitude is normalized, her intellectual stasis juxtaposed against her friend's cultivated respectability. The quote from Spivak that 'the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant' (Spivak, 1994, p.82) resonates here as well. In "Dulari", this dominance is both classed and gendered. Upper-caste men (like Kazim) possess unchecked power, while lower-caste women (like Dulari) are doubly silenced.

The contradiction between intimate desire and caste-inflected disgust comes into stark focus during her sexual exploitation by Kazim (Deiri, 2025). The narrative's chilling understatement - 'She shut her eyes and handed over her body and her heart to Kazim' (Zaheer, 2014, p.10) disguises coercion behind language of surrender. Rao's formulation clarifies how caste and gender oppression makes the Dalit woman's body both available and disposable. The aftermath is moral spectacle: "The sight of an unchaste, insignificant creature being disgraced brought to them an exaggerated sense of their own superiority..." (Zaheer, 2014, p.12) The need to discipline her body affirms the elite's moral virtue, demonstrating Rao's argument that caste hierarchy is reified through the public performance of shame.

Spivak's framework helps interpret the narrative silences. Even Dulari's psychological distress is narrated without subjectivity: "This was, however, an internal state of mind about which she neither knew the cause nor the remedy for it." (Zaheer, 2014, p.8) Her interiority is rendered inarticulate, her pain observed but never owned. Even expressions of compassion: *The modest, chaste and unpolluted Haseena begum pitied the poor girl with all her heart but could not comprehend how any girl could abandon and step out of the safety of the home where she had spent her whole life (Zaheer, 2014, p.11).*

It functions as forms of epistemic containment (Carr & Incetas, 2018; Acar et al., 2025; Acar, 2025; Pan, 2023). Dulari's exit from the household is neither celebrated nor understood; instead, it is recast as moral failure: "She had had to sell her body and face poverty and humiliation! It was true that she was a londi, but did running away from home improve her lot in any way?" (Zaheer, 2014, p.11). This assumption that her degradation is inevitable culminates in brutal caste commentary: "it was not as significant a loss for a londi as it would have been for a respectable woman" (Zaheer, 2014, p.11). The londi-Dulari becomes a body that cannot suffer 'true' loss, because caste precludes it. Even her brief return is engineered by a savarna savior: "The old man, who had known Dulari since her childhood, spent many hours persuading her to return until she finally agreed. The old man imagined that he would be rewarded and that the girl would be bailed out of trouble" (Zaheer, 2014, p.10). Her agency is erased; her rescue becomes his redemption. Zaheer subtly constructs critique through metaphor: *The sight of an unchaste, insignificant creature being disgraced brought to them an exaggerated sense of their own superiority and merit. The vultures preying on the dead bodies of animals do not realize that the defenceless body into which they jab their foul beaks are, despite being dead, better than those like them who are alive (Zaheer, 2014, p.13).*

The image collapses victimhood and moral depravity, offering a searing commentary on elite hypocrisy. The story reaches its climax not with confrontation but with silent disavowal: 'All at once, Kazim emerged from a nearby room along with his beautiful bride. He did not look at Dulari' (Zaheer, 2014, p.13). Kazim's refusal to acknowledge her presence, and the narrative's return to bourgeois respectability, reinforces the pattern of epistemic silencing. Spivak's assertion that 'the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read' (Spivak, 1988, p.308) directly addresses this erasure. Dulari, though present, remains unreadable - an opaque figure whose suffering is neither narratively resolved nor socially recognized. In her final moment, Dulari becomes the agent of disruption: *And now he, too, had started saying these things. This deep anguish transformed Dulari into a figure of feminine majesty. She got up and glared at the whole gathering with an expression which made them leave one by one until no one remained. But that was merely the last, desperate attempt of an injured bird to take flight (Zaheer, 2014, p.13).*

This silent gaze is her only speech. It breaks no social order, makes no overt challenge, yet destabilizes the moral façade. For Rao, this is a rupture in the structure of embodied inequality. For Spivak, it is a strategic silence that evades epistemic domestication. "That night, she disappeared once again" (Zaheer, 2014, p.13). This final act is Zaheer's refusal to offer closure. No restitution, no reintegration. Dulari's disappearance is a symbolic withdrawal from a world structured to exclude her. It is Rao's fleeing body and Spivak's unspeakable subject simultaneously. Her vanishing indicts the ideological mechanisms of religious, literary, and familial, which construct and then discard the Pasmanda woman. Zaheer's narrative offers no consolation, only confrontation. And in doing so, it underscores what Pasmanda feminists insist: that without caste, no account of gender in Muslim contexts can claim critical or ethical adequacy. Zaheer's "Dulari" refuses the progressive tropes of restoration or reform. Instead, it confronts the reader with the full weight of caste-gender violence, not as aberration but as structure. By centering the body and voice of a subaltern Muslim woman only to ultimately deny her narrative closure, the story stages

what Pasmada feminist critics like Kazim (2021) and Ansari (2018) insist upon: that without an analysis of caste, neither gender justice nor class critique within Muslim contexts can hold.

DISCUSSION

Where the Brahminical feminism of the early 20th century constructed elite women as the primary subjects of speech and visibility, and where even progressive literature often rendered the subaltern woman an object of paternalistic concern, Sajjad Zaheer's "Dulari" offers a radical alternative (Diaz et al., 2021). The story's power lies not only in its choice of a Pasmada protagonist but in its profound exploration of resistance outside the established modalities of voice. "Dulari" anticipates the core concerns of Pasmada feminism precisely because it rejects the binary of speech versus silence, instead locating agency in the quiet, embodied gestures of refusal. By foregrounding the exploitation of a 'londi'... the story stages a critique that is simultaneously about caste hierarchy and the very politics of literary representation itself. As Khalid Anis Ansari (2018) observes, the lived experiences of Pasmada women such as Dulari expose the hollowness of Islamic egalitarian claims, especially when those claims are upheld by Ashraf elites who continue to benefit from labor hierarchies and sexual control. The patronizing morality of figures like Begum Sahiba, who insists that "higher classes always take care of the lower ones" (Zaheer, 2014, p.14) reflects what sociologist Faiyaz Ahmad (2004) identifies as the paradox of Muslim social reform. The rhetorical embrace of equality is effectively paired with the perpetuation of caste endogamy and occupational segregation. Zaheer's depiction of Dulari's embodied labor and subjugation aligns with what Sharmila Rege (2013) terms the "double burden" of Dalit women—being hyper-visible as workers and simultaneously invisible as subjects. Dulari is seen, touched, adorned, and violated, yet never granted narrative interiority. Her body becomes the ground upon which elite benevolence and sexual violence unfold. In one instance, 'she prepares sherbet for Kazim while crying silently', which is clearly an act of service, laced with dread.

"Dulari's" most radical move, however, lies in its refusal of conventional protest. The protagonist's resistance is articulated through quiet gestures: 'silence,' 'stillness,' and ultimately, her 'disappearance' at the end of the narrative. Her final act of 'rising,' 'glaring at her oppressors,' and walking away, disrupts the expected moral arc of the story without offering any redemptive resolution. This scene exemplifies what Anupama Rao (2009) refers to as "the politics of presence," wherein the subaltern asserts herself not through dialogue but through the body's refusal to participate in its own subjugation. This form of embodied, non-verbal dissent finds a powerful parallel in Arshad Alam's (2021) analysis of the survival strategies adopted by Pasmada Muslims, especially women, who often rely on endurance and strategic withdrawal as protest mechanisms in environments where speaking out may be either unsafe or ineffectual. Alam explains that many Pasmada Muslims cannot openly raise their voices against Ashraf dominance because their very survival, particularly within religious institutions like madrasahs, depends on funding and approval from Ashraf elites. As a result, protest is often deferred or masked. This dynamic resonates deeply with Dulari's condition in the narrative. Like many Pasmada individuals situated within hierarchical religious and social systems, Dulari remains silent and voiceless for most of the story. It is only after she leaves the oppressive household that she finally asserts herself. Arshad Alam, in the section titled "The Ajlaf Muslims and the Madrasahs," of his book *Inside a madrasa: Knowledge, power and Islamic identity in India* (2021) writes: *A madrasah graduate who has internalized the strategies of his own survival would in all probability reproduce and transmit the very same understanding of Islam which he gained from the madrasah where he studied. Moreover, as is well known most of the religious institutions are controlled by the Ashraf Muslims. There are reasons to believe that most of the funding for madrasahs is provided by upper caste/class Muslims. Under these circumstances, speaking for greater lower caste representation would automatically translate into an anti-Ashraf position* (Alam, 2021, p.178).

Thus, Dulari's silence is not passivity but a tactical response to systemic constraints, a form of resistance that emerges only when it is safe to do so, mirroring the deferred dissent of Pasmada voices under Ashraf dominance. Zaheer's literary strategy of rendering Dulari's erasure as central part of the story, aligns with what Pasmada intellectual Ali Anwar (2001) describes as the fragmented archive of Dalit Muslim women's histories. These narratives often exist in silences, gaps, and refusals, rather than in fully articulated political speech. In this way, "Dulari" stages not only the trauma of caste-gender oppression but also the representational limits of capturing subaltern agency within dominant discourses. The story becomes a form of negative dialectics, articulating the unspeakable by exposing its absence.

The white chadar emerges as a key symbol in this resistance. Initially imposed upon Dulari to signal shame, it is later re-appropriated as a garment of silent defiance. In her final moment, Dulari is no longer simply the object of elite pity or discipline; she becomes an unsettling presence who challenges the legitimacy of the moral order that had previously silenced her. Dalit and Pasmada women's resistance often involves creatively reworking symbols of oppression into tools of dissent. The chadar - a visual marker of modesty and submission - becomes, in Dulari's hands, a vehicle of departure and refusal. In reclaiming "Dulari" as a Pasmada feminist text, this paper situates Zaheer within a broader genealogy of anti-caste Muslim critique. While the PWM largely bypassed

questions of caste in Muslim contexts, “Dulari” reveals Zaheer’s acute awareness of internal hierarchies and his willingness to dramatize their effects through a marginalized female figure. As Mohammad Sajjad (2014) points out, such self-reflexive critiques were rare among Muslim progressives, making “Dulari” a vital yet overlooked contribution to both literary and political discourse.

Moreover, “Dulari” compels a re-evaluation of feminist solidarity frameworks. It challenges the tendency of dominant Indian feminism to universalize Hindu upper-caste female experience and reminds us that Muslim women’s subjugation cannot be adequately understood without accounting for caste. The text’s continued relevance lies in its call for expanded solidarity; one that incorporates Pasmada perspectives as foundational rather than peripheral to feminist and anti-caste movements. In short, the story offers not just a narrative of individual suffering but a literary precursor to Pasmada feminist thought. It provides a critical archive through which we can interrogate the failures of both secular and religious reform, and begin to imagine more inclusive and intersectional futures.

CONCLUSION

Zaheer’s “Dulari” (2014) demands a rethinking of caste, gender, and class in South Asian literary and political discourse. Situated within the early years of the Progressive Writers’ Movement, the story both aligns with and critiques the movement’s ideological commitments. While the PWM emphasized class struggle and anti-colonial resistance, “Dulari” exposes its blind spots by foregrounding caste oppression within elite Muslim households, especially as experienced by lower-caste women. In doing so, the narrative anticipates contemporary Pasmada feminist critiques that center “triple marginalization” as the defining axis of subaltern Muslim women’s lives (Ansari, 2018; Kazim, 2021).

This paper has shown that “Dulari” operates at the intersection of literary form, historical critique, and embodied resistance. By drawing upon Rao’s (2009) theory of embodied inequality, Spivak’s (1994) concept of epistemic exclusion, and the praxis of Pasmada feminism, we see how Zaheer’s text functions not merely as a depiction of servitude but as a critique of its structural foundations. Dulari’s silence, labor, sexual exploitation, and final disappearance are not just narrative events; they are political signs. Her body becomes the site of caste, her silence a strategy of resistance, and her final glare a refusal of elite moral paternalism. In particular, the story critiques the theological rationalization of caste within Muslim society. The narrator’s claim that her inferior status is “God’s design” (p. 12) reflects the same kind of religious naturalization of hierarchy that B.R. Ambedkar (1945/2014) identified in Pakistan or the Partition of India, where he asserted that caste was deeply entrenched in Muslim society despite rhetorical claims to equality. In this light, Zaheer’s work challenges the assumptions of both secular progressives and Islamic reformists who have historically denied or minimized caste’s presence in Muslim communities.

The story also highlights the limitations of dominant feminist frameworks in India. Indian Feminism during early phase was Brahminical in nature focusing on the issues of upper caste women ignoring the oppression faced by Dalit and Pasmada women within Indian Society. “Dulari” challenged the Brahminical narrative by writing about a protagonist with multi-layered character who is a woman, a maid, an orphan, and a lower-caste Muslim - excluded not only from elite society but also from dominant Indian feminist and anti-caste discourse. Her presence thus demands a feminist reorientation: one that is intersectional, decolonial, and attentive to the specificities of caste within minority religious formations. In reclaiming “Dulari” as a foundational Pasmada feminist text, this paper contributes to the broader project of expanding anti-caste discourse beyond Hindu social structures. It challenges scholars to examine caste’s operation within Muslim communities without re-inscribing communal binaries or cultural essentialism. As Rao argues, caste must be understood as a trans-religious structure, a form of inequality that transcends any single theological or cultural tradition. This insight is particularly relevant in an era where both Hindu nationalism and Islamic orthodoxy risk erasing the internal dissent and heterogeneity within their communities.

Moreover, “Dulari” invites a broader reconsideration of the role of literature in producing counter-histories. The story functions as an alternative archive or a literary space where silenced voices, erased labour, and embodied resistance are preserved in affect and form. Its refusal of resolution, redemption, or reform mirrors the reality of many Pasmada women whose struggles remain unacknowledged in public discourse. As such, it models a form of narrative justice that operates not through catharsis but through disruption. In the end, “Dulari” offers a vision of feminist and anti-caste solidarity that is grounded in specificity and resistant to abstraction. Its central argument and question are not only to represent the subaltern, but to recognize her when she does not, or cannot speak in Mainstream Feminist Language. The importance of Dulari and her story lies in her ability to challenge mainstream feminist discourse by presenting intersectional complexity of gender, race, and religion. By doing so the narrative demands for the urgency to create a space in society and literary world which allows to represent hierarchies within our struggles.

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Ethical statement

This study is based on textual analysis of published literary and theoretical sources. It did not involve human participants, personal data, or animal subjects. Therefore, formal ethical approval or IRB clearance was not required.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

The authors jointly conceptualized the study and developed the theoretical framework. Sudesh Manger conducted the primary textual analysis and drafted the manuscript. Badusha PM contributed to the literature review, historical contextualization, and data collection from primary and secondary sources. Deepjoy Katuwal assisted in refining the methodology, strengthening the theoretical synthesis, and critically revising the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data availability

All data analyzed in this study are derived from publicly available primary literary texts and secondary scholarly sources cited in the reference list. No new datasets were generated for this study.

AI disclosure

The authors used generative AI tools for limited language editing and stylistic refinement. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the content of this article.

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