[Dr Naazir Mahmood](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-naazir-mahmood)

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**Raziya, Shaukat,and the PWA: Part - II**

By From 1948 to 1956, Raziya was alone in Lucknow taking care of her three daughters, teaching, writing and translating to earn a meagre livelihood. Raziya was still unsure if her husband would be released from prison in Pakistan – and if so whether he would be allowed to come back to India.

While Raziya lived in Lucknow, Shaukat was in a communal tenement in Bombay with her husband in a small room surrounded by similar rooms where other comrades lived. It was a commune where cooking was common but cleaning was individual responsibility.

Kaifi Azmi spent most of his time in labour colonies of Bombay such as Madan Pura. He also served as the editor of the Urdu quarterly magazine, ‘Naya Adab’. In 1949, the PWA held its conference in Bhivandi near Bombay. The CPI had been banned; the PWA was working but it adopted a more reddish approach calling for all writings to reflect Red in it. Later, the comrades decided to take out a large procession against Morarji Desai, the chief minister. The procession was attacked by the police and dispersed.

That was the time when my father, M Rashad, was also a young progressive activist in Bombay. He worked closely with Kaifi, Sardar Jafry and Niaz Haider. My father is eyewitness to many of the things described by Shaukat in her book. Much later in the 1980s, while in India I was able to meet Kaifi, Niaz Haider and Noor Zaheer. It was altogether a delightful experience to relive vicariously all those moments. According to the changed policy in post-independence India, the PWA too followed a more revolutionary line and so did the IPTA. The Congress government led by Nehru, who was otherwise lenient towards left-wingers, could not tolerate the open call to revolt against the Congress government.

A crackdown resulted in the arrest of many comrades and the remaining, including Kaifi, had to go underground. In this situation, Shaukat had her first child but for lack of finances she could not give him proper medical treatment resulting in his death. When she got pregnant again, the CPI asked her to have an abortion. Neither the couple nor the party had the resources to take care of the child, but Shaukat refused, and in 1950 Shabana Azmi was born. Shaukat recalls that, in the absence of Raziya and Sajjad, it was comrade Mehdi who supported her in the PWA meeting when she was asked to abort the pregnancy.

To raise the infant, Shaukat started working in Prithvi Theatres and carried Shabana with her all the way to the Opera House in Bombay. After coming back, she would also do cooking and cleaning while her husband, Kaifi Azmi, was busy in labour colonies. From 1951 onwards, they lived in a room in Red Flag Hall in Bombay where there were eight rooms and each comrade family settled in one room. Shaukat recounts how they lived in that room with their two children, Shabana and Ahmer Azmi, for nine years till 1960.

Red Flag Hall was a cornucopia of ethnicities and religions from different parts of India. There was only one bathroom for eight families with children, but Shaukat recalls no fight over the single latrine they shared. Since Raziya and Sajjad Zaheer were not in Bombay anymore, Sardar Jafri and his wife Sultana acted as grandparents of all children.

Sajjad Zaheer was released and decided to move back to India in 1956, and the family was reunited in Lucknow. Noor Zaheer was born in 1957. Noor Zaheer begins her book in 1964 when Raziya and Sajjad set up their humble abode in Delhi. That was the first time – barring a five-year period in Bombay from 1943 to 1948 – that they were together. When Sajjad Zaheer died in 1973, they were living in the same house.

‘Mere Hisse ki Roshnai’ is neither a chronological narration nor a biographical account. It is a simple story of the couple that devoted its life to literary and political endeavours so that they could nurture a progressive and secular generation. Raziya translated over 40 books into Urdu and left an incomplete novel on the life of the poet Majaz Lucknowi. And that she managed when she was also making copies of her husband’s writings, as Photostat did not exist at that time. Noor informs us how her mother produced multiple copies using carbon papers, while her father did not bother to do so.

Raziya was much more meticulous with her things; she did not brook any laxity in cooking or caring. Noor narrates how after every couple of months her mother would start a ‘cleaning drive’ and her father would dread that moment. When Raziya started cleaning, Sajjad would not budge an inch from the writing table lest she disturb his papers. And what a writing table it was! Just an old book shelf was converted into a writing table by adding a wooden plank to it. Noor movingly tells us how her mother would weep quietly at not being able to arrange for some basic working needs for her husband.

Then, somehow, Raziya was able to buy an old table for her husband. At home they discovered that one leg of the table was shorter than the other three, but the father was content with that, and Noor would skilfully insert a folded newspaper under the leg to stabilize it. They called the table ‘Tamerlane’. The Zaheers were beyond any religious or sectarian prejudices, and celebrated all festivals in their modest dwelling. Be it Eid or Diwali, earthen lamps would lighten up the home. Similarly, New Year’s Eve was a big celebration with friends.

With all this, who would visit them? Well, Faraq Gorakhpuri, Josh Malihabadi, Ghulam Rabbani Tabaan, Ali Sardar Jafry, Niaz Haider, Mulk Raj Anand, and the who’s who of the progressive literary circle. For dinner, there were always a couple more people than expected, and Noor wonders at her mother for her culinary skills and kitchen management even with a tight purse. The home was always filled with discussions on history, current affairs, literature, philosophy and what not. Raziya used to get up at 4:30am and begin writing much before the children or her husband left their beds.

From 1960 onward, a main difference between the two families was that the Azmis became financially better off thanks to Kaifi Azmi’s song writing for Indian films such as Guru Dutt’s ‘Kaghaz ke phool’ (1960), ‘Shola aur Shabnam’ (1961), ‘Haqeeqat’ (1964), and the lyrical screenplay for the popular flick ‘Heer Ranjha’ (1970). Kaifi formed a group with Madan Mohan and Chetan Anand, and wrote for many successful films. Kaifi and Shaukat’s most successful film was ‘Garm Hawa ‘(1973) earning them not only good money but also three Filmfare Awards for story, dialogue, and screenplay.

The Zaheers had no such income. Raziya lost her 68-year old husband in 1973 when she was just 55, and could live only for another seven years. Kaifi lived to his mid-80s and Shaukat well into her 90s. The Zaheers belonged to a very rich family but Sajjad had left all that, and had opted for an austere life; Raziya wholeheartedly accepted that and never aimed for financial prosperity. Noor is proud that her parents made that decision. And I have had the privilege of having Noor as a family friend since 1984.

Concluded

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK and works in Islamabad.

Email: mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk