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“Andhera”¹

Razia Sajjad Zaheer
Introduced and translated by
Saba Mahmood Bashir

Introduction:

The name Razia Sajjad Zaheer (1918-1979) brings to mind an image of a well-built woman with a full-throated laugh. I am not sure, if that is how she laughed. However, the reason why I have this image embedded in my subconscious, is because I have seen such a photograph. After all, not many photographs of writers and poets of that generation are available.

I cannot recall when I first read Razia Sajjad Zaheer or Razia *Apa*, as she was fondly called. Perhaps, I began to read her stories and novels after I had read her daughter Noor Zaheer’s *My God is a Woman*. Round the same time, I developed the desire to learn more about the women who saw India through her independence and helped build the new country. I had read the English translation of Sajjad Zaheer’s *Roshnai (The Light)* long ago and learned much from it. This book is, perhaps, a most critical introduction to the history of the Progressive movement in the Indian subcontinent. But I feel that Razia *Apa* and her writings were overshadowed by her husband’s persona. In no way, I am undermining

¹ Razia Sajjad Zaheer’s “Andhera” was first published in *Biswin Sadi*, 1966. I have translated it here as “Darkness” from the short stories collection of Razia Sajjad Zaheer, “Allah de banda le” published in 1984 by Sima Publications, New Delhi, available at <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/allah-de-banda-le-raziya-sajjad-zaheer-ebooks>

the role Sajjad Zaheer played in shaping the path of the literature to come, not only in Urdu but also in many other Indian languages, but Razia *Apa* hasn't received the attention that is due to her, especially, beyond the world of Urdu literature. One finds very few of her stories translated into English or other Indian languages. Even with regard to her personal life, the credit she deserves is not given to her. Sajjad Zaheer was arrested by the British very soon after they got married, and even later, he would be away in Pakistan in prison, or the USSR for long spells, because of his commitment to the Communist Party. It was Razia *Apa* who worked resiliently all by herself, bringing up the four daughters, teaching, writing and publishing continuously. The body of work that she produced is remarkable.

One can say that Razia *Apa* led her life on her terms. She belonged to an educated family; her father being the Principal of Ajmer Islamia College. She was married at the age of twenty in 1938 to Sajjad Zaheer, who was belonged to an elite and educated family. Zaheer's father was a Judge at the Lucknow Court and he was sent to Oxford to study law. However, being exposed to the Left ideology there, he no longer wanted to practice law but devote himself to the service of the common man. It was believed that Razia *Apa* would convince her husband to give up his communism but exactly the opposite happened. In no time, she was influenced by her husband's Marxist ideology, who had just launched the All-India Progressive Writers' Association. Razia *Apa*, already a graduate before her marriage, went on to do her post-graduation from the Allahabad University. One notices that the content of her writings, be it her short stories or her novels, were woven around the lives of ordinary women from the middle classes, leading regular lives, facing everyday challenges. What was prominent was, of course, her Marxist-socialist approach to all issues. With regard to her literary endeavors, I feel her translations open a window to literature form across the world, for Urdu readers. Her translation of Brecht's play *Life of Galileo* as *Galileo* was published by Sahitya Akademi, and was much acclaimed; so was her translation of Mulk Raj Anand's *Seven Years* as *Sāt Sāl*, published by Maktaba Jamia. Her translation of Maxim Gorky's biography as *Zindagī kī Shāhrāh Par* was also well received. She received the Uttar Pradesh Sahitya Akademi Award and the Soviet Land Nehru Award for her literary output.

With regard to translating the story 'Andhera' (Darkness) into English, one can easily accept that translating from one culture into another is always a challenge. Although it was published in 1961, roughly

six decades ago, the source language used in the story is very familiar even today. Not much has changed in terms of the vocabulary of language. However, there were two main challenges: how would I translate the cultural nuances and secondly, how would I express some of the protagonist’s inmost feelings in another language. The story revolves around fear – the fear suffered by a woman travelling all alone in a first-class railway train compartment. Here is a woman, conscious of her religious identity, and afraid about what might happen if she is cornered and finds herself enmeshed in the web of the communal poison that had spread all across the country? One needs to remember that Razia *Apa* had witnessed the freedom struggle, and the Partition. The protagonist of this short story makes attempts to hide the external markers of her religious identity, to the extent, that even an Urdu novel that she was carrying needs to be hidden away. This makes one think how closely language was associated with religion during those days. The vivid description of the train journey is most visual in its description, and this is yet another aspect of Razia *Apa*’s writing that makes the task of the translator all the more difficult. Compounding these challenges, was the difference in the tone and language of the characters in this story. The language spoken by the Muslim friend was different from that spoken by Sikhs. Translating these different varieties into a single or common English idiom was difficult as well. I have tried, to the best of my ability, to tackle the issues I talk about. A story so rooted in the cultural milieu of its belonging, had its own challenges with regard to all the cultural transmissions. I wonder what would Razia *Apa*, herself a translator would have felt about it.

Darkness

A monsoon night, a light drizzle, the Old Delhi railway station, a train going to Amritsar, with some coaches in the dark, some in light. It was already 8 o’clock. The train had to leave at 9 pm but still, the light in the compartment had not been turned on. The lights on the platform were scattered about, dimly lighting up the compartment. One could clearly read ‘I’ on the coach, which meant it was a ‘first class coach’. And, till now, the notice on the window had her name printed on it. Seeing all the coolies coming that way, she wondered if they were coming to her coach, to keep more luggage in it. And, if the coolies were accompanied by a woman in decent enough clothes, she would wish that the woman would come in that very coach; but seeing ‘I’ printed on it, the woman would move further ahead.

She started getting angry at her husband. *How many times she had asked him not to book a first-class ticket. The train passes through all of Punjab...what if ... she is all alone in the coach? Of what use is such comfort if one has to spend the entire night in fear.* There was some hope when someone was spotted in a railway uniform, with papers and pen in hand. *Maybe, it would happen that he would go near that notice and write a woman's name on it. And then that woman would come. She would definitely have a child with her. That woman would open her canister when the train would move. Every Punjabi traveller has a canister full of eatables. And, she would surely offer it to her – “here, you must also have something ... sweets, rotis!”*

Maybe, women who board first class coaches do not carry canisters. Wah! How is that possible? It is possible that she turns out to be the wife of this railway officer. The senior officials of the railways get first class passes and...but that officer walked past her, singing some film song... and her name remained in the coach, all by herself. Her Muslim name. Her trademark. Her identity. A red flag for her. And she had to spend the entire night in Punjab. There was rain, there were clouds, and there was darkness...one tends to be frightened in such situations. Although it has been years since something happened in Punjab. But what can one say – anything can happen – anytime, anywhere. Why do such things happen...? No one has the answer to this question!

Some of her friends had come to drop her. Her husband had come too. But all of them would remain behind and she would have to travel by herself all night and reach Amritsar the following morning. Although she wouldn't tell anyone where she had to go beyond Amritsar, everyone would figure that she was a Muslim woman going to Amritsar.

When she stretched out her arm to take the *paan* her husband had bought her, she noticed that a middle-aged Sikh, who had crossed the compartment for the third or the fourth time, read her name on the list there, looked at her, and then looked away, placing his hand on his *kirpan*. After all, why was this middle-aged Sikh making the rounds of her compartment? *Surely, he belonged to the generation that had left behind home and land in what was now Pakistan. No, not left...all of that was snatched away from him. And, who was it who snatched it away from him...but...her eyes once again went to the list where her name was written...her Muslim name – her trademark. And, the Sikh knew that she was all alone in the compartment. The men standing outside the*

compartment were Muslim too but they were not going with her. They were all standing outside. Besides, she had very little luggage with her, which couldn't belong to more than one person. It was apparent that she was alone. Whispering, she asked one of the young men from the group, “Have you checked if the doors can be bolted from the inside, bhaiyya?”

He responded carelessly, “Yes, *Apa*. I have checked them. They can be fastened on both the sides.”

She got irritated. *Uff! How stupid! What was the need to call her ‘Apa’ so loudly. But what difference does it make? The way her name was hanging on the door, it seemed she herself was hanging by it.* In the meantime, the lights in the compartment were turned on. Her meager luggage was kept under the berth and her bedding spread out on the lower one. All those who had come to drop her, came inside and sat down. How comfortable the berth was! A wooden plank opened out from the metal wall of the coupe. She placed her thermos-flask on it, and pulled out an Urdu novel from her handbag; really, the first class is so luxurious. But ...but...that Sikh once again passed by the compartment, staring at her. *Did he touch his kirpan tied to his waist, under his very loose shalwar and kurta or did he merely adjust his shalwar? Arre! He has climbed onto the second-class compartment, adjacent to this one. What if, on a smaller station, he....* Stories of communal riots she had read in the papers, began crossing her mind. This was the same train that was once the Peshawar Express. As the engine whistled, she expectantly looked at her husband and friends, and then the adjacent compartment, where she saw the elbow of that man resting on a window. She pulled herself in, glanced all around her compartment. She was all alone!

She quickly shut both the doors; fastened the bolts; checked the latches; looked under both the berths and peeped at the top berths too. The train started moving slowly. Once again, wistfully, she looked at her husband and friends on the platform. They were waving out to her. She waved back mechanically. By now, the train had caught speed. As she stopped waving and stood straight, her heart skipped a beat. She had forgotten to check the bathroom! Just then, the train changed its track and she got a little unsteady and held on to the top berth to balance herself. Very slowly, she started walking towards the bathroom.... *Should she open the door or not? What if someone was hiding in there! Why was the latch of the bathroom door oscillating? Is someone inside it?* She stood there, staring at it. The latch kept moving continuously. The train changed

track once again and she swayed once again.... *Uff! The latch is moving because the train is moving.* She held the handle and pushed open the door. *Surely someone is hiding behind the door.* But as she pushed open the door, she found herself thrust into the bathroom with great force.... There was no one inside it!

She came back to her compartment, sat on her berth, and wiped her sweat. Craning her neck, she tried to peep out but couldn't do so because the windows were barred. One by one, she tried to peep out of each window. She could still see the elbow of that Sikh man jutting out. *Perhaps, he has fallen asleep! But could he have fallen asleep while sitting? Perhaps, yes. Thank God the railway division has put bars on the windows.* She pulled down the glass windows too... but everything was visible through them. She turned off the lights. Even then, if one were to peer into her compartment from outside, it would be quite apparent that there was only one passenger inside, and that too a woman. As it is, 'Ladies Coupe' was printed outside the compartment, and her name was written under it – her identity.

She pulled out a quilt from her hold-all, rolled it up and placed it on the upper berth. Then, she covered it with a sheet. She also, placed her pillow at the head of the berth, such that if someone would peer into her compartment from outside, it would seem as though someone was sleeping up there. Having done all this, all of this, by the time she sat on her berth, the train had begun slowing down. It was approaching some station. Very quickly, she spread her bedcover on her berth. What was the need of a mattress in a first-class coupe? The berth was cushiony enough! *Damn this first class! Had she been in the third class at this moment, she would have been so much at peace!*

All the glass windows and doors were shut and bolted and it was terribly hot inside. The train arrived at the platform and came to a halt. There was chaos on the station and there was banging on the compartment door. "Open it!", someone screamed from the outside. "This is the ladies' compartment" she yelled back, and when she looked out of the window, this side and that, she spotted the same Sikh standing there – as if, watching over his prey trapped inside for now, but which might escape in the opening and closing of the door. And, over and above, there was yet another Sikh man along with two young Punjabi boys, and he was signaling something to them. The passengers who had mistakenly knocked at the door, had moved on. The train whistled, jerked, and slowly

started to roll out of the station. They also ran to climb into their compartments but one young fellow said rather loudly, “Yes! It is an Urdu novel”.

And, that middle aged Sikh replied, “Didn’t I tell you that”. All of a sudden, her eyes fell on the folding table screwed onto the wall of the compartment, where she had taken out and placed an Urdu novel to read on the way. So, those people had seen it through the glass window. They must have peeped in...and they must have also noticed that she reads Urdu and hence, she must be “that,” that is, a Muslim!

It is different for men. Hindu men also read Urdu. But women! She pulled out a bunch of keys from her bag, opened her box and put away the book inside it, kept the keys on the bedding and lay down. Suddenly she got up and opened the glass windows and pulled down the metal, slit shutters. Let us see what happens now! At least the shutters were keeping the compartment ventilated and it wasn’t so suffocating anymore. The train picked up speed. She pulled her legs closer to get stomach, placed her hands under her head, and cuddled herself up as she though were saving herself from an assault. She shut her eyes; the air filtering through the shutters was blowing directly over her head, the lights were turned off...then she felt she was sliding back, but there was a wall behind her. Then a kirpan swayed in the air and its tip was poking her in the ribs. She wriggled, wretched, agonized, distressed but the tip of the kirpan kept on poking her...cold, pointed, sharp...and when she felt it with her hand, it was wet and sticky with blood. All of a sudden, she awoke – her back was pressed against the wall to which her berth was attached, her palms were sticky with sweat and one of the keys from the bunch she held in her hand, was poking her in the ribs. The train was slowing down.

She pulled out her watch from her handbag... It was three o’clock...did this mean she had fallen asleep?... how could she have fallen asleep in such a tense situation? Great! She had actually slept! She sat up and rested her head against the wall. She was feeling extremely tired now after her short nap. She also had a terrible headache and her eyes were smarting.

The train slowed down further, and finally came to a halt. But this wasn’t any station – outside, was dense jungle, darkness – and a little rain too. She tried to listen to the sounds coming through the window. The

bushes outside, were so close that she could hear the rain insects... *jhun jhun jhun jhun*... In the distance, the sound of the engine could be heard.

A couple of men crossed the tracks, swinging lanterns. She again got close to the window, trying to listen to something. Someone called from a distance: “Somebody has pulled the chain in a compartment.”

Someone responded from the other end: “from the one next to the first-class coupe.”

Someone asked: “What has happened?”

Someone replied from the other end but she couldn't hear what he said because her heart was pounding so hard, she feared it would jump out of her mouth. *Hers was a first-class coupe and there were people sitting in the next compartment. What if they were the ones who had pulled the chain? The man with the kirpan and his friends were in that coupe. They must be the ones who had pulled the chain.* She again started recalling the stories that told of chains being pulled, trains being stopped, and people dragged out and killed. She noticed that those two men were again standing in front of her compartment, on the boulders outside, and looking in the direction of her coupe. Even in the darkness, she noticed a strange longing in their eyes, as if, had the door been open they would have leapt right in. Maybe they thought that the door would open when the train stopped; maybe, she would ask: “What happened” or “What is it?” and, they would leap forward and catch hold of her. But how can that happen? There were other people there too. But what difference does that make? There were people everywhere! They were there in Nawakhali and in Ahmedabad; in Wagah and in Jabalpur too. The rioters were not more than two to four hundred, and the rest of the people, in thousands, and lakhs. But what could they do? And, the image of Vera swam before her eyes – the slim, cheerful Russian woman Vera, who was her interpreter during her journey to Russia, whose infant couldn't bear the sound of the cannons and the machine guns of the fascists and grew up to be a mentally challenged child and Vera would have to carry this cross all her life. She would often say: “I do not question the Nazis, but I want to know from each German why he or she remained quiet? Why did they let this atmosphere of fear spread so far that I feel that each and every one from their community is my enemy? Definitely, all of them are not my enemies ... but I only ask – How would you have felt, had you been in my place?”

A railway worker crossed the compartment outside, banging some implements against the machinery below, while another passed by swinging a lantern. One was saying: “Someone has killed him and thrown his body on the track to give the impression that he was killed by the speeding train.”

Hearing the familiar dialect of her area in Punjab gave her some courage. She started recalling Lucknow, the place where not a single riot happened, where she had lived most of her youth and in fact, her life, without experiencing any kind of fear. Lifting the shutter, she asked in the dialect that they had used: “Why has the train stopped *bhaiyya*? What is the reason?” One of the workers stopped and observed, quite surprised: “Mata ji, you seem to belong to our part of the land!”

For a split second, she wanted to leap out of the train and hug this person from her land and weep, and say: “Aye?” But by now, a number of people had gathered closer to her window. There were two young men also.... Dressed in pants and shirts; she noticed something strange about them – the way they seemed to be rejoicing and wondered what they were talking about, in Punjabi. Instantly, she pulled down the shutter. The coach jerked, the engine whistled, the train started to move slowly, and then finally, it picked up speed. She sat in her coupe, without the lights. She would, at times, lift the shutters and take a look outside and then promptly pull them down again. Sitting there for such a long time, the train jerking every now and again, her back had begun to ache, her eyes were closing with fatigue, but she remained sitting upright, till dawn, and horizon turned a pinkish white. It was not yet five o’clock in the morning.

Now, the train was nearing Ludhiana and a close Punjabi friend was coming to meet her at the station. This thought gave her some strength. She got up, and went to the bathroom to wash her face. Even after washing her face with soap, for a couple of times, the dark circles under her eyes looked strange in the mirror. These dark circles weren’t there yesterday, when she had left her home happily, and her husband had come to see her off...but now, how her lips were dry, and her cheeks seemed to have sunk in. Her appearance had changed in a single night. *Does a face change so greatly out of fear?*

She pulled out a lipstick from her handbag and applied it, and instantly looked beautiful. *It would look so strange if her dead body were wearing lipstick! People would comment, “What kind of a woman was she*

that she desired to wear make-up before dying!” Then she applied some vanishing cream, powder, and kohl in her eyes. She combed her hair. All of a sudden, a thought crossed her mind – *surely, she was safer in the bathroom of the coach.* The window seemed stronger over here. She remained standing there, combing her hair. The train began to slow down. This was a small station before Ludhiana. She peeped out of the window. The edge of the platform was visible along with the darkness next to the platform, and a portion of the wheels. She strained her eyes to see the wheels of her coach. Then she spotted six pairs of shoes on the platform, out of which, one seemed the Peshawari kind; the bottom of a loose shalwar; bottoms of different kinds of pants! She tried really hard but could not see the men completely, to ascertain if they carried kirpans on them or not. Every time, the edges of the windows would become visible instead. So, these people were focusing on her coach, else what was the need for them to get off at each and every small or big station? All of a sudden, the train jerked. She lost her balance but quickly held onto the basin and steadied herself. When the train picked up speed, she opened the window and peeped out. She looked at both the doors of the coach. They were bolted, both from the top as well as the middle. Staying where she was, she checked under the berths, on the top berths too. Her mattress and pillow were still lying on the top berth. It was completely desolate. No one was there. Only her trunk was kept there and its lock was moving along with the moving the train.

She came out of the bathroom quickly, opened the lock on her trunk, pulled out a clean sari kept on top of the pile, and rushed back to the bathroom. (*It was definitely safer than the compartment!*) She always prided in claiming that she could drape her sari within five minutes, but this time, it took her so long, it seemed an age had passed by! The train began to slow down once again. It must be approaching Ludhiana now. It was morning. The train stopped. She didn't open the door of the coach, but lifting the glass shutter, she spotted a man on the station. Next to a tea stall, her Punjabi friend was there, waiting for her. She felt that she had got a new lease of life and her eyes brimmed with tears. The train hadn't halted when he came forward, greeted her very respectfully, and took down her luggage. Oh, how much she needed this support!

He cajoled: “Eat something, Apa. The train will halt here for a while.”

She turned around and looked at the tea stall. All those who had stared at her through the last night were there, still staring at her. One of them moved forward and signaled to a friend, and who can tell what he was asking his friend. Her heart began to pound all over again. What if ten or twenty people were to surround her friend? What would he be able to do? Just then, something occurred to her. She recalled that one of her Punjabi friend’s wife would say: “My father always said, ‘beta, never make the mistake of sheltering a Muslim. He will not be able to save himself and you too will be killed.’”

She realized suddenly, that her friend, and everyone else, along with him, was walking towards her. He was in the middle, and it seemed that the others had surrounded him. His brows were knitted as if there was something that he wasn’t pleased with. And, without knowing why, she began to trace her steps backwards. Her mind was completely blank, her eyes wide open, her feet felt as though they were made of lead and she broke into a cold sweat – she couldn’t see anything. She felt she was in a bad dream; she wanted to scream but could not bring herself to do so.

A young Sikh man came forward, and she felt she was hearing a voice from a great distance: “Apa! Are you unwell? You look like you are going to faint!”

She could not respond. Another faint voice came from a great distance: “She had shut the windows of her compartment through the night. She must be feeling unwell because of the heat.”

Then she heard the familiar voice of her friend: “Apa, these people have read your stories. They have been travelling with you from Delhi, but were not sure if it was really you, and they couldn’t muster enough courage to come and speak with you. I have been telling them to let you have your breakfast first, and then I will introduce them ...”

It seemed to her that while all this was being spoken, she was moving – no – she was being carried by someone else – both her arms were held in another pair of strong arms. Then someone put her down on a bench, while everyone else surrounded her.

Her friend was speaking now: “Apa, these people were asking me to introduce you to them. This is Sardar Buta Singh ji. He is in the carpenters’ labour union. He is also a poet. He even helps the children of

his locality with their studies. The middle-aged Sikh man greeted her with folded hands, and addressed one of the young men: “Oye, where is Surendar?”

“He has gone to get tea for Apa”

“What good will tea do! He should get some milk instead.”

She saw a young Sikh man coming towards her. He was carrying her trunk, bedding and the remaining luggage. As soon as he had kept the luggage down, beside the bench, the train whistled to leave the platform.

Alarmed, she stood up: “Oh...I have missed my train...who brought my bags here? Arre . . . I have to go to Amritsar!”

The boy who had brought down the luggage from the train settled his clothes and said: “I got your luggage out. Amarnath bhai told me: ‘Get Apa’s stuff. She doesn’t look well. Let her rest here for a while.’ I will drop you to Amritsar by my car. I own a motor garage. I read your stories. My name is Kishan Singh. We listen to your stories on the radio too. We would like to listen to something from you. . .”

But she wasn’t listening to anything, because she was busy cursing herself. She had imagined that these people who were her in reality protectors, were her would be murderers. *They were her readers and her patrons, on whom depended her literary reputation while she had imagined that they would bring harm to her! These were the readers for whom she had sweat drops of blood, and she had imagined them to be her enemies. Shame on her!*

She questions all her readers now, her well-wishers and her patrons – was she in reality, a bad person or was she merely an unfortunate person, blinded in this world of suspicion and darkness?