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“Chor”¹

Rasheed Jahan

Introduced and translated by
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Introduction:

Rashid Jahan (25 August 1905 – 29 July 1952) came from a highly illustrious family of educators. Her father Sheikh Abdullah, an avid social reformer, founded the Women’s College at Aligarh Muslim University. Jahan grew up in an enlightened and evolved environment. Her father ran a widely-circulated women’s journal called *Khatun* (Woman) and her mother would regularly contribute to that. Her literary training with a socialist bent, began pretty much at home. After receiving her early education in Aligarh, she went to Lucknow to earn a degree in Science from Isabella Thoburn College and then moved on to earn her medical degree from Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi.

She went on to publish the collection of short stories called *Angarey* (Embers) along with her companions Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduz Zafar and Ahmed Ali in 1932. The book considered by many as the precursor of All India Progressive Writers’ Movement in India, was banned by the British government of the United Province. Rashid Jahan helped establish the All-India Progressive Writer’s Association (AIPWA) and consistently wrote stories that challenged anything oppressive in the societal norms.

¹ Rashid Jahan’s short story “Chor” has been translated as “The Thief.” (<http://www.rekhta.org>)

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Jahan in fact officially joined the Communist party and became its card-carrying member.

Despite being a trained gynecologist, Rashid Jahan become more and more renowned for her stories that she was writing with her characteristically stark honesty and deep insight into the society of which she was a part. Jahan’s socialist and feminist ideals shine brilliantly through her stories. Her characters and plots steeped deeply in exposing how the South Asian society was functioning. Her representations lit the future path for feminists across the region. Strikingly she went on to inspire Ismat Chughtai, the other firebrand writer of Urdu literature. Chughtai herself admits the admiration she had for Jahan.

Jahan was not writing a certain kind of content just to be daring. Like a very responsible writer who wants to rebel against the hypocrisy of society, she wrote only what mirrored the existing conditions. She did not shy away from exposing the double standards of conservatism and patriarchy. To contextualize her tales, it is very important to keep in mind the specific points of Islamic culture that she was attacking. She would write unabashedly on the issues of the female body, sexuality, women’s position in the public arena as well as domestic space. For example, in “Dilli ki Sair” (A visit to Delhi), she writes very simply but with a deep sense of irony, almost frustrating the female reader, regarding how, despite being burqa-clad, a woman cannot be comfortable in a public space. The male gaze with its entitlement will penetrate right through the veil.

Another very famous illustration of the issues she was trying to bring into the public consciousness, comes from her story “Woh” (“That One”). It is about a series of meetings between a young and idealistic teacher, Safiya, and a Prostitute. The latter’s face is severely disfigured due to the effect of some venereal disease. She doesn’t have a name but is referred to as ‘woh’. She wants to cultivate an equation with Safiya who comes from a slightly elite stratum of society. The story should be read as a great metaphor talking about interclass interactions, biases, repression as well as hope, besides an obvious treatise on the ‘ideal’ female body/face/sexuality/aesthetics.

In “Parde Ke Peeche” (“Behind the Veil”) she brings on the surface stuff that was not even considered worth writing about. This is just a simple dramatization of an ill wife and a disinterested husband. From the

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simple dialogic exchange, she extracts critical questions of how this patriarchal set up secluded women, without even feeling concern or guilty – the responsibility that women are supposed to be born with and carry through life, and the privilege with which men conduct themselves without once reflecting on it.

In “Mera Ek Safar” (one of my journeys) she takes the reader into the world of a small and crowded lower class, train compartment. This coupe is mostly occupied by ladies. Women who usually do not get a chance to meet each other in the streets, let alone fight in them! So here they get a chance to be with each other in close proximity. Suddenly due to an innocuous incident of someone’s dupatta touching someone else’s sari, a frenzy erupts. The flames of communal tension that are carried by males outside, in the public domain, spills over to this private space where women have got a chance to come together. This forced, cramped intimacy, both empowers the women as well as brings out the worst in them. This kind of dark irony is one of the most interesting aspects of Jahan’s writing.

I can go on illustrating my point by giving the span of issues she covered despite her thin body of work, but I would highly recommend the readers to discover and interpret her on their own. The sharp beauty in Jahan’s writings is that she takes myriad instances and characters from her life as a practicing doctor and turns them into tales – stories that jolt the readers out of their comfortable conventional zones, and question their own moral stance or judgement. She was living through stormy times and her stories were only trying to shed some light on the underbelly of that era. She was not preachy in her writings but was definitely telling her stories to serve a social or utilitarian purpose. All her stories are issue based, especially problems that were being faced by Muslim women of every stratum. She wanted those problems discussed openly in the public discourse. She was wielding the sword of literature to win the battle of social reform – an ambitious inclination, but a highly crucial one, and one for which all of us should be grateful to her, and try to carry forward. This war is far from over.

Translator’s Note:

I chose, with great trepidation to translate her short story “Chor” (“The Thief”). I say with trepidation because it is always difficult to translate a simply written text. A text which is deliberately trying to have

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no literary flair and making its point in such basic yet hard-hitting flavor that it leaves an even deeper impact.

Naturally I decided to keep the English translation as basic as Jahan intended the story to be. The reflections of the Lady Doctor protagonist as well as her conversation with the Patient / Thief are all written in a straightforward way. I did not want ‘myself’ to show anywhere in the story, to intervene anywhere in what Rashid Jahan was writing. I deliberately chose to keep any modern sensibility, whether of language or thought, out of this translation. After all, every story must be read in its social and political context. Analyzing and interpreting is the job of the literary critic, not of a translator. If Thief is using a cuss word which Jahan leaves half-said, I have done the same. If the Doctor is snapping in a certain way, I have tried to follow the tonality of the snapping as closely as possible.

Why did I choose this particular story? Simply because of the juxtaposition of the deeply moral, social and philosophical questions it leaves the reader with; and the straightforward way it has been written. “Chor” (“The Thief”) reads like an almost comic tale with an odd dark humour till the last paragraph of the story. That’s when Jahan in her characteristic style shakes us out of our reveries and poses some questions to us. The self-effacing protagonist, the one who according to society makes the silliest decision that evening, the authorial voice, asks all of us to question our definitions of crime and punishment. It forces us to reflect upon what as a society we celebrate despite its oppressing us, and what we get judgmental about because it suits our class affiliations.

Like all her other stories, this “Chor” is also a fable, a metaphor of society and its hypocrisy and places the moral choice in the hands of her readers. I hope that through this translation, I serve some purpose of carrying forward and spreading Rashid Jahan’s intent in my own, very modest way.

The Thief

The clock had just struck ten. I was by myself in my clinic, perusing a medical journal when the door opened and a man entered with a child in his arms. I felt a bit annoyed with my nurse who had left the door

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unlatched. My patient-examination hours were over quite a while back. In a slightly brusque tone, I said:

“I am done for the day. No more patients. Bring him tomorrow morning, or you can take him to some other doctor.”

The man was not very tall but he had an athletic frame. The child he was carrying appeared a bit short of breath, and a case of pneumonia was apparent. Loosely and listlessly, he hung onto his father’s neck. He could’nt have been older than a toddler.

The man replied matching my brusqueness –

“Madam please take your fees. Isn’t that all you want?”

The financial consideration of my livelihood could have mellowed me a little, but his tone and manner irritated me immensely.

“No doctor works without a fee! I said my hours are over. You should know that doctors need their rest too. Besides, your child seems too sick . . .”

“That is precisely why I have brought him to you, Doctor. My sister-in-law’s child was in a worse condition. Your treatment cured him completely.” He was beginning to sound politer now.

I was not placated yet. “If you were so keen on my treatment, you should have come a little earlier.”

“There was no one else to bring him, and I couldn’t come earlier than this.”

I noticed a scar of a deep wound on his temple. *‘This boor must have been beaten up in a brawl!’*

The toddler suddenly began crying, though very feebly. I felt a surge of pity. Taking out my stethoscope, I began to examine him. The man instantly brought out a ten-rupee note from his shirt pocket and placed it on my desk.

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I finished my examination. “I am giving the child an injection right away. The same dose will be repeated over the next four days at intervals of four hours, daily.” Assuming his poverty I added “No need to pay my fees. Just pay for the injection and get the rest of the medicines from the market.”

Arrogantly declaring, “I don’t need charity treatment for my child,” he took out a knotted handkerchief from his garment. Just then, the telephone rang. While answering that call, I happened to look in his direction. He was untying the knot of his kerchief and I was quite shocked when he took out a thick wad of currency notes – it must have been close to five hundred rupees. Placing one more ten-rupee-note on the desk, he asked:

“Is this enough or you want more?”

I finished the phone call with some perfunctory response, then addressed the man.

“What is your name?”

“Kamman” he responded a bit hesitatingly.

‘Kamman’ – the name sounded a little familiar. Oh yes! The chief inspector who had come to investigate the theft at my place, had taken this name. The other cops while talking amongst themselves had referred to the scar on Kamman’s temple as well. I stared at him while he nonchalantly looked around. I started preparing the injection and casually asked him – “What do you do for a living?”

He was about to answer when I added “You were once a horse-cart driver, weren’t you?”

“How do you know” he asked surprised. “Where have you seen me? I have never visited you before today.”

Filling up the syringe with the drug, I said: “You forget, Kamman. Just about two months back you broke into my place in the middle of the night, and burgled it clean. Why do you steal?”

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He looked me straight in the eye and replied with equal authority –
“Madam, we all have our respective professions.”

Now it was *my* turn to be taken aback.

“But tell me, who told you my name?”

“The police investigator and his squad were praising your extraordinary achievements. I overheard. They must have come to your place for an investigate too?”

He started swearing at the police.

“These policemen – motherff... they get their share before we get ours. Sister, *they* give us a bad name. Telling the thief to steal and showing fake concern to the rich victim. I will deal with that inspector later. Madam do you know, they come to search my dwelling a hundred times a year. And who gives me prior information of the raid? They, themselves! All of them get a fixed monthly share each. I have had a warrant in my name for the past five years, but by God’s grace they haven’t been able to arrest me.” He bragged proudly about his situation.

I steadied the toddler’s leg for the injection. Kamman kept mumbling.

“It is those bastards who come and tell us about an upcoming search-and-frisk. Madam if the police weren’t in cahoots with us, we wouldn’t survive two days in any area! Some nerve they have in giving *us* a bad name.

“Careful, don’t let the child’s leg move.”

“The scoundrels eat away more than half the pelf. What’s left for us? We do all the hard work, we are the ones at risk of getting caught, we are the ones that get thrown in jail... and those motherff... sit on their butts and relish the freebies.”

His face was red with rage. He did not even care about the crying toddler who was now sobbing softly. Laying the child on the table, I started patting him to soothe him. Kamman and I had become a bit informal now. I wanted to talk to him a little longer. This was my first,

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ever, meeting a thief, and that too one that had burgled my own house. I said:

“Kamman, you steal. But don’t you feel a little pity? Just think of my house. You took almost everything. There were no clothes left even to wear. And come on now, what can eye-glasses fetch you? I can’t believe you took my spectacles away as well.”

“Nothing goes waste.”

I looked at him a bit surprised and said “there was a dupatta that was my mother’s memory. You took that away too...”

“*Should I get him handed over to the police?*” prompted a voice from within me.

“Which dupatta?”

“White, with netted embroidery. How would you remember? Who knows how many countless thefts you must have committed from my house till today.”

I was trying to engage him in conversation. “How did you start being a thief?”

“*Should I press the electric buzzer and beckon my staff members?*”

“Just like everyone else in any other job. I learnt from my Master.”

“Master? Are there teachers in your line too?”

“Obviously! How did you learn your craft?”

“I went to a medical college. *Should I ring the bell or not?*”

“We also have our own college.” He smiled. “My college was the jail. They gave me six months imprisonment, thanks to a little skirmish. That’s where I met my Master.”

The toddler started crying again. Right then the door opened and my younger brother clad in his army uniform entered. He was much stronger

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than Kamman. I could see his service revolver peeping from its holster. Kamman startled a little at his sight. He immediately picked up the prescription and started to leave. “*Should I get him caught or shall I let him go?*” My mind was racing. I had still not come to a decision when he hurriedly made his way out.

“Apa, what happened? Why are you looking so stressed?”

“You know who that was? The thief who had broken into my house.”

“How do you know?”

“We talked.”

“You talked to him and you let him go?” My brother darted towards the door and frantically looked around. The lane was perfectly bare. He even ran up to the turning but couldn’t spot anybody.

He came back to my cabin a bit annoyed. “You are unbelievable, Apa. You encountered your thief and let him escape! Why have you kept a watchman? Why didn’t you call him? And I came in *while* he was still here, and you did not utter a word? His fingers caressed his revolver and he seethed “I would have never let the bastard go.” My brother is a famous hunter too. Presently his face had the same expression that a frustrated predator has on letting a prey slip through its fingers.

“Have you ever heard of this kind of madness? Letting a thief go!”

I remained silent.

“Apa, you are too emotional. I am quite sure your heart melted at the sight of the child. Oh, look at his guts. He has actually left twenty rupees for you! I am certain this is also stolen money.”

“He even had a bundle of five-hundred-rupee notes.”

“Goodness, gracious me! You might be my older sister but you are really, quite stupid.”

This became quite a topic of discussion among my friends and family; that the thief who had burgled my house had come for his child’s

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treatment to me, and I could have turned him over to the police, but I let him go. Everyone made fun of me, but nobody really understood my inner conflict. Till date I am not sure whether I made a mistake or not.

I have a friend who is a policeman. When he heard this story, he remarked: “Do you know, you are legally in the wrong? Consciously not handing over a man, in whose name a warrant has been issued, to the police, is an unlawful act.”

I think about all the thieves in whose names there are *no* warrants, nor will there ever be!

Even theft has its varieties. Shoplifting, pickpocketing, breaking-in, black-marketeering, exploiting others’ labour to fill your own coffers, occupying other people’s land and nations – can one count these as thefts or not?

I usually don’t care much about what others opine, but when people started making fun of me and considering me an idiot, I felt a slight prick in my conscience.

‘Did I actually commit a moral sin by letting this thief go?’

‘I am a citizen of my country. I have some duties and responsibilities. Did I commit an offence against my country, by not handing over this thief to the authorities?’

Then I started looking all around me. I saw many thieves, many wolves in the sheep’s garb, sinners pretending to be saints, roaming around freely. They live in elite colonies. They travel by air. They’ve either had a huge steal or are preparing for their next big one. Kamman only bribed the police for his protection. These other thieves are way ahead of him. The entire country’s police and armed forces are on their payroll. Kamman’s gruff attitude and arrogance came from petty thefts of five hundred or six hundred rupees.

These people are not just arrogant, but they sit above the rest of us, and also order us around.