

Remembering Jeelani Bano: The Woman, the Writer and the Voice of Resistance

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*“Mere musalsal likhte rehne kā ek hī maqsad hai ke merī
likhī huī ek satar kisī ko sach bolne kī tāqat de, chor ko
mujrim kehne kā hauslā ho” - Jeelani Bano*

(The sole purpose of my writing relentlessly is the hope that
a single line written by me will give someone the strength to
speak the truth, and the courage to call a thief a criminal)

Jeelani Bano's words remain strikingly relevant today, particularly in a world where the boundaries between truth and illusion are increasingly blurred. A distinguished name in Urdu literature, her remarkable and prolific literary career spanned decades. On 1st March 2026, when she left for her heavenly abode, she left an unfortunate void in the literary world and among writers and thinkers committed to social justice and progress. A writer par excellence, she used her writing to chronicle the ethos of Hyderabad, class conflict, and cracks in feudal society, and became a voice of



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feminist consciousness. Born on 14th July 1936 in the small town of Badayun, Uttar Pradesh, into a traditional, tight-knit family of four brothers and two sisters, she later moved to Hyderabad, and is widely known as the Pride of Hyderabad.

Bano began writing as a child, at the young age of eight. She inherited her love of literature from her father, Allama Hairat Badauni, a well-known poet. Owing to his literary background, she met writers like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Makhdoom Mohiuddin, Krishan Chander, and others who belonged to the Progressive Writers Movement. Despite being homeschooled through high school, Jeelani Bano was raised amidst literary gatherings and poetry sessions at home. In a candid interview for a Sahitya Akademi documentary, she shared, "So once I wrote a short story and sent it to one of the literary journals Abba used to subscribe to. Surprisingly, it got published, and all hell broke loose at home. I was severely reprimanded and told to refrain from such things in the future." Although her father wanted the best education for all their children, their mother, Begum Shakila Khatoon, wanted her daughters to learn traditional crafts like sewing and embroidery. Author Dr Odhesh Rani, her childhood friend, fondly recalls their time together and how the celebrated poet Makhdoom Mohiuddin once cautioned Bano's father never to stop her from writing. When Sukrita Paul Kumar asked in an interview, "Do you feel alienated in a man's world of writing?" Bano replied, "Frankly, I have never curbed myself from writing on a particular theme just because of my being a woman. Nor have I ever thought of this as a limitation. I've always felt free to express whatever has gripped me. How society may respond has not bothered me".

She published her first story, "Ek Nazar Idhar Bhī" (a glance hither) in 1952 in the annual issue of the Urdu magazine *Adab-e Latif*, but gained instant recognition with "Mom kī Mariam" (waxen Mary), which established her as a strong voice in Urdu literature. It carried with it an unmistakable flame of feminist resistance, dealing directly with the subjugation of women. Thereafter, her career blossomed. She wrote two full-length novels, two novellas, and two children's storybooks. She also wrote radio plays, especially the remarkable audio series on Dakani Urdu. She was closely associated with eminent artists Qurratulain Hyder and M. F. Hussain. She is often seen as a key link between Hyder and Chughtai and as a representative of emancipated women writers in Urdu. Chughtai once wrote to her, "After marriage, respect your writing as much as you would respect your husband and in-laws."

Bano used Hyderabad as her canvas to represent a pan-Asian milieu.

Her novels *Aivān-e Ghazal* (palace of odes) and *Bārish-e Sang* (hail of stones) poignantly depict human suffering. *Aivān-e Ghazal* addresses the decline of Hyderabad's feudal culture, the Telangana movement, Partition, and the fall of the Asaf Jahi order. *Bārish-e-Sang* explores the psychological and political effects of feudalism in Telangana's rural underbelly. In her short fiction, she presents multiple facets of humanity against the backdrop of Partition and the merger of Hyderabad State into independent India. Her fiction is personal yet grounded in history and politics. Her latest work, *Rāstā Band Hai* (the road is closed), captures the system's negligence and apathy toward the people of its city. She highlights grave social evils and injustices, including the preference for sons over daughters, the anxious wait for a suitable match for a daughter, when a family cannot afford a dowry, and the casual disregard for women's emotions and desires. In an interview with Mazhar-uz Zaman Khan, Bano said she did not write from inside a closed room and never believed herself to be an ivory-tower writer. She observed closely, the world outside her home and wrote from that experience. Her genuine disdain for being pigeonholed into categories is evident in an interview given to the English daily, *The Hindu*, where she says, "I do not write only about women's issues; I write about issues concerning all of humanity. Please stop confining me within the narrow brackets of a 'woman writer' or a 'Muslim woman writer'. A writer is simply a writer." Her works have been translated into several Indian languages, as well as Russian and European languages. A young generation of scholars and researchers, drawn to the breadth of her writings, is actively re-examining her literary contributions. Her autobiography, published in 2014, *Maiñ Kaun Hūñ? Nau Umrī ke voh Din* (Who am I? My youth days) offers a window into her personal life, tracing her journey from her formative years to the emergence of the writer-self. In *Dūr kī Āvāzeñ* (distant voices), a series of letters, Bano shared her correspondence with contemporary Urdu writers. Her stories came alive when her play *Narsaiyyā kī Bāvdī* (Narsaiyya's well) was adapted into the film *Well Done Abba*, directed by Shyam Benegal. Bano's oeuvre is believed to be unmatched and unique by comparison with that of her contemporaries by some literary critics.

Jeelani Bano received many accolades, including the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1985 and the prestigious Padma Shri in 2001. She remained active in social causes and efforts to improve women's lives. She was the chairperson of 'Youth for Action,' an advisor to the 'Child and Women Human Rights Forum of the International Human Rights Association of India,' and worked with radio and television.

A life lived with equanimity was not untouched by personal grief. Bano endured the loss of her eldest son and her brother, losses that deeply affected her, along with the vulnerabilities of age. She was a writer with a cosmopolitan sensibility, and her stories have directly reflected society in all its nakedness. Her fiction carries the emotional and intellectual depth that steered Urdu literature in new directions. Her demise is a profound loss to the Urdu literary canon, yet through her works, she continues to breathe life into the fire of resistance and resilience, keeping its flame alive.

(With details from Sahitya Akademi's documentary directed by Dinesh Lakhanpal, an interview on Door Darshan Urdu and excerpts from an interview given to Sukrita Paul Kumar)

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