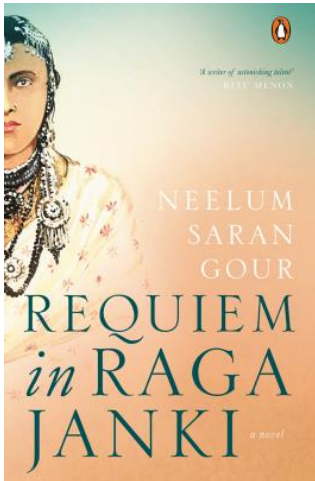


## Book Review on Neelum Saran Gour's 'Requiem in Raga Janki'

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Centuries ago, regarding a poet's take on historical subject Aristotle in his *Poetics* mentions that "there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he (the author) is their poet or maker" (7). Even today, his view on the poet in 350 BC is relevant to every literary practitioner dealing with historical theme transcending the temporal and spatial borders. Since the later decades of twentieth century one comes across a recurrent historical theme in Indian English writing especially fiction,

which indulges itself into postmodern devices and recreates the forgotten history from various perspectives. One such novel is Neelum Saran Gour's 'The Hindu Literary Award' winning composition *Requiem in Raga Janki* (2018).

Reflecting upon the coercive strains of Indian sensibilities this novel engulfs in itself extended information of the history of the Eastern music and its complex theories while reiterating the story of an exceptionally talented woman who has almost a century before endorsed her most conclusive mark in the history of entertainment in the subcontinent. Leaning largely on Gour's imaginative cult, this narrative provides a fictionalised version of Indian musical history as well as a historical figure with a keen utilization of Indian Landscape, particularly Allahabad, a place of famous institute like '*Prayag Sangeet Samiti*' (1926), with its rich Classical music heritage. Apart from configuring a historical woman artist, the novel also subtly pictures the familial as well as socio-cultural complexities of Indian life.

Exclusive narrative strategy hinging upon postmodern metafictional attribute gets reflected as the book engages an unnamed old 'rasika' (connoisseur) as narrator of Janki's story, who self-consciously talks about her storytelling based on memory that may overreach reality and also make the readers aware about the possibility of amalgamating history with fiction as for her, "one may write one's life story as one pleases if truth holds no

copyright over imagination" (Gour 41). It basically intends to elevate the story of a woman artist in history who despite her artistic excellency is almost forgotten in her own region. Regarding her choice of Jankibai's as the protagonist of her narrative from her own city, Allahabad Gour herself says in an interview with Latha Srinivasan that "I like writing about my city, Allahabad, which I share with Jankibai" (*The Sunday Guardian*, July 7, 2018). She also makes it explicitly clear that her fascination is Jankibai is more as an ordinary Indian woman than her celebrity status.

Oscillating between the fact and fancy, the author familiarises the readers with the knowledge of Hindustani classical singer Janki Bai Ilahabadi (1880-1934) who was born in a 'halwai' family in Benares to Shiv Balak and Manki. Describing Janki's challenges since her childhood, Gour narrates the incident of how she became a victim of vicious stabbing by a deranged 'sipahi' (soldier) Raghunandan (her suitor) and turns into a "Chhappan Chhurri" (56 Knives) as a survivor of that incident. *Diwan-e-Janki* often attempts to romanticise this attack for a mystifying appeal but Gour emphasises on Janki's struggle, her strong mentality to overcome a difficult situation echoing her 'will to live' (Schopenhauer). Here, Janki's plight as a victim of stabbing is no less altered than any acid victim woman in contemporary Indian society and therefore, Gour's rewriting of Janki's tale is explicitly relevant with considerable mass appeal.

Janki's personal life as well as her career as an artist provides ample space for upholding the great Indian musical heritage. The author sketches the subtle complexities of Indian classical music through the mouth of Hassu Khan, Janki's music teacher as a part of her 'taalim' (education). She extensively deals with Hindu and Muslim tradition regarding origin of 'ragas' by delineating upon Indian 'ragas' with their specific time of practice such as a morning raga is *Bhairavi*, *Bhim Pallasi* is an afternoon raga, *Aiman* is most sung in the evening and *Malhar* is a rainy season raga. However, she makes it a point to mention that all the musical 'gharanas' were essentially male dominated as "In the old gharanas the real taalim, the precious teaching, was for sons" (Gour 75) and Janki's willingness to partake in such world as a woman is reflected through her utterance, "But wasn't there anything for daughters?" (Gour 75)

Certain chapters also discuss the history of patronizing Classical music in India by great emperors like Akbar and Shah Jahan. In Gour's discourse Raja Maharajas in Jankibai's time give her the required opportunity to start her career as 'baiji' (music performer) in various palaces like 'Darbar of Rewa', Queen of Benares' and so on. However, these opportunities could not establish Janki Bai beyond a beautiful face, truly justifying the Hindi saying, '*Pehle darshan dhaari...badmein goon vichari*' that can be loosely translated as, it's 'the outward look that matters first followed by quality' and therefore a woman artist is expected to be a beautiful object of public gazing first and

later on as a performer. Janki experiences this during her first few professional music performances in 'Rewa darbar'. Here, Janki's bold assertion makes authorial voice visible, "My Lord, an artist is measured by her *seerat*, not her *soorat*, by art not her face. My *soorat* is worth nothing, my *seerat* I leave you to judge" (Gour 130).

International influence in Indian Classical music in the form of Gramophone adds up another dimension to the text as it is an essential offshoot of 'technoscape' (Appadurai) in colonial India. The tension between traditional and modern musical practice is heightened with Hassu Khan's disgust in welcoming Gramophone whereas the then eminent singers like Gauhar Jaan, Miss Rani, Miss Sushila, and Miss Binodini endorse their lineage towards this instrument for their musical career. Even Jankibai starts earning a lot through her musical recordings in the early decades of nineteenth century. Women artists like Jankibai and Gauhar Jaan hold high stance in India's cultural heritage for their musical performances were held before British audience in the coronation ceremony of George V and Queen Mary. Although it was time of colonial dominance, but the book echoes critical attitude towards British as "the Jallianwala Bagh thunderclap unstrung Janki utterly" (Gour 291) and her nationalistic zeal gets reflected in her interaction with Motilal Nehru regarding her donation in country's favor.

The narrative underscores layered issues other than just being a fictionalised biography. From her childhood Janki

faces several personal obstacles as she is deserted by her father and reared up by her mother Manki who takes up the responsibility by being sold off in some Allahabad 'kothi'. Manki ensures that Janki becomes a renowned singer under the tutelage of Hassu Khan. Throughout the book Jankibai behaves not as an 'angel in the house', rather a dynamic woman who self-willingly changes her religion to Islam, not as a seeker of cultural convenience, but for the fact that she was more comfortable amidst her Muslim friends. In certain sections of the book, there is a significant predicament of Janki as both traditional and modern woman, as she herself chooses Abdul Haq as her husband but at times she also gets ready to be submissive only to adjust in family. She adopts a child against her husband's wish and even after her son deserts her she still cherishes and nourishes her 'motherhood' by rearing up Chandni as her own daughter who later dies of cholera. In spite of numerous hindrances in both her personal as well as professional life, this woman figure never compromises with her grace and dignity. Gour's narration here significantly highlights how humble, modest and generous Jankibai remains as a woman in spite of her worldwide eminence.

*Requiem in Raga Janki* is incomplete without reconstructing Allahabad into its narrative paradigm. Allahabad here operates almost as a make up to Henri Lefebvre's concepts of 'material space', 'social space' and 'mental space', as reflected through Janki's journey both as a woman and as an artist. In the most deplorable phase of

life after Shiv Balak's desertion of family this city offers them economic refuge; here Janki also gets her social status as a singer. Apart from economic self-sufficiency, this city provides them the much coveted space "a woman must have...a room of her own" (Woolf 7) for artistic creation and this city actually offers them that 'space' which gets "constructed out of social relations" (Massey 2). Resonating social geographer Doreen Massey's notion of dynamic gender roles as a product of intersection between place, space and gender, Allahabad can be aptly read as a spatial construct that provided scope for dynamic gender relations as Haq Sahib had to accept his wife's wealth (i.e. a house in Allahabad) as a part of legal formalities to be an Election participant in that city. Notable utilization of Allahabad's landscape as a reflection of the protagonist's mindscape draws considerable attention, for instance, the projection of Allahabad's river 'sangam' (confluence) where Janki immerses her *Saraswati* idol after converting to Islam. Her immersion of Hindu idol doesn't imply that she is erasing her Hindu faith, it is a kind of 'sangam' of her religious beliefs just as the river Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati meet and flow together without losing each existence. This is how the author attempts for a message to blur the demarcating lines between religions across India through her narrative flow as Jankibai feels, "her Islam had only extended her original Hindu self, added something while uprooting nothing, that there was nothing antithetical in her successive registers to belief, only a fulsome continuity" (Gour 188).

Gour's use of 'angrezi', is an Indianised English loaded with various Hindi and Urdu words spontaneously maneuvered in the text for instance 'moholla' (locality), 'rooh' (soul), 'gopis' (cowgirls) and many more. Even parallel use of Hindi and English sentences, are intensely done like "Bahut achchhe. Now speak, my dear. Kuchh bolkar dikhaaiye" (Gour 48), "Taal gaya to baal gaya... if rhythm be lost, consider it the loss of a hair" (Gour 85) and so on. Apparently the attached glossary and notes towards the end of the text may appear monotonous to refer constantly during reading but it definitely enhances the intelligibility of the text across continents. T.S Eliot in his seminal work "Tradition and the Individual Talent" had visualised that historical sense "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" which can be totally appropriated in the context of *Requiem in Raga Janki* as it is a perfect blend of 'historical sense' while recontouring Janki's personal tale.

The entire novel projects the author as an astute observer of Indian socio-cultural life who magnificently touches the very nuances of Indian life in her composition which is significantly compelling as well as relevant in today's society.



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