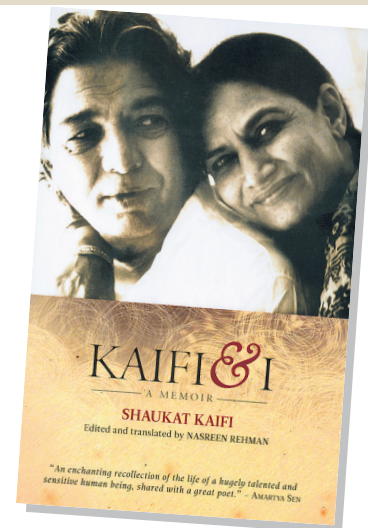


SHABANA AZMI ON ADAPTING *Kaifi & I* FOR STAGE

The kind of audience *Kaifi Aur Main* appeals to are romantics, fans of my father's songs, of his poetry. All these are integral to the language the book was written in. It wouldn't be fair to bring it back in English



Shabana Azmi with her mother Shaukat Kaifi at their Juhu apartment
PIC/MAHANAND GUPTA



THE STORY OF US

VETERAN ACTRESS SHAUKAT KAIFI AND DAUGHTER SHABANA AZMI ON LOVE, LIFE, AND THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING *YAAD KI REHEGUZAR* INTO *Kaifi & I*

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It could well be a movie. It's the 1940s. Rich girl, already betrothed, meets a young communist and falls madly in love. Girl's father sneaks her into Mumbai so she can make up her mind. Finally, she does marry the man of her dreams. *Yaad ki Reheguzar* by veteran theatre and film actress Shaukat Kaifi, was published in 2006 and the English version, *Kaifi & I*, translated by Nasreen Rahman, launched this week.

At their sunlit Juhu home, Shaukat Kaifi, daughter Shabana Azmi and Nasreen Rahman talk in turns, sometimes overlapping each other as *Kaifi Azmi* seems to come alive in the conversation.

A translation was in the works even before *Yaad ki Reheguzar* was published. Nasreen Rahman who heard an extract in the year 2000 was so taken in, she told Shaukat that she'd want to do it. "I never thought *Yaad ki Reheguzar*

would be such a success, but I've heard people say that they can read it at one go, it's so interesting," says Shaukat with a proud smile. She credits the success to her simple writing.

Shabana feels it worked and will work because of its background — India before Independence and after, the age of rebellion and in the midst of all that, a love story. "It's a distinct female voice, one that is at once conformist and non-conformist," she says.

TRANSLATION QUALMS

Initially, Shaukat did have reservations about a translation. "Cheeni (Nasreen) liked the book so much, but I was worried that something might be lost." The stage adaptation of *Yaad ki Reheguzar* — *Kaifi Aur Main* (performed by Shabana Azmi and Javed Akhtar) became a resounding success, making Shaukat confident.

Shabana says translation was a tough call. "Translating it from one regional language to another is easier, because there are similarities and also, her style of writing is very lucid and made up of short sentences. But from Hindi to English was a daunting task," she says.

Nasreen agrees: "Any act of translation is a challenge because the spirit of the text must be retained." She says the prose struck her the first time she heard it. "It was full of contemporary metaphors but very vivid. It was a magical experience," she recalls. Nasreen read it several times because, "I wanted to capture the spontaneity, her voice. At some point I had to leave the Urdu original and look at it as an English text. Now it works,"

says Nasreen, to which Shabana pips, "It has to work. Just because a certain work is a translation, the reader isn't going to treat it with kid gloves. They expect to be satisfied reading the book as is."

NO CURTAIN CALL

However, *Kaifi & I* will not be adapted for stage, says Shabana. "The kind of audience *Kaifi Aur Main* appeals to are romantics, fans of my father's songs, of his poetry. All these are integral to the language the book was written in. It wouldn't be fair to bring it back in English," she says.

BEING SHAUKAT'S DAUGHTER

In her days as a theatre actress, Shaukat, also a full-time mother and wife, was obsessed with learning lines. "She'd be talking to the *dhobi* and suddenly, she'd scream out a line of dialogue," says Shabana with a laugh. Shaukat would also dress up like her characters at home. "One day we'd see an African woman, another day a mad woman and so on," she recalls. Once, a young Shabana told her father very seriously that she was afraid her mother was losing her mind. "He explained that she was an actress and I must support her," she says. Years later, Shabana imbibed the same method when preparing for her roles in *Godmother*, *Umrao Jaan*, even *Makdee*.

Shabana recalls a childhood of limited means but pretty clothes nonetheless because Shaukat was always particular about aesthetic

appeal. A daily routine involved brother Baba and Shabana dressed up in their evening best, and being taken to the neighbourhood hall by the ayah. They would gatecrash *Navjoth* (Parsi thread ceremony), marriages, and other functions, and eat their fill. "Until the watchman wised up and realised that we couldn't have been invited for every function," she recalls.

Shaukat was a brutally honest mother. When a nine-year-old Shabana asked her mother why she loved her brother more, Shaukat replied that he was a sweet well-mannered child and she loved his company, unlike Shabana who back-answered. "Can you imagine any mother talking like that today? They'd be scared of damaging the child's psyche. But it worked for me, I started behaving better," she says.

SHAUKAT THE HEROINE

When we're done with the photoshoot, Shaukat demands to see her photographs. She doesn't like being clicked with her walking stick in the frame. "My mother is completely vain," says Shabana fondly. As if to make herself plain, she points to herself and Shaukat: "You notice how I'm dressed and how my mother's dressed." While the actress is in a comfortable orange and white *salwar-kurta*, Shaukat fits in her role as heroine, in an elaborate black and red sari with matching jewellery. To fit the film-like quality of her book... and life.

Indeed, a top filmmaker had once expressed interest in adapting *Yaad ki Reheguzar* as a movie. "After watching *Saawariya*, mum was convinced that only Sonam Kapoor would be attractive enough to play her if a film was made," says Shabana with a laugh. *Kaifi* seems tougher to cast, as the actress says, "He (*Kaifi*) was such a beautiful man, I can't even imagine who could play him. Hrithik (Roshan) maybe?" she asks.

Nasreen adds that she had earlier watched Shaukat's films and later, observed her over decades. "I admired her forthrightness, her sense of clothes. She's lived her life like a work of art. I don't quite know another life that's truly heroic as hers is," she says.

Kaifi & I is published by Zubaan, available for Rs 295