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Shabana Azmi

An Unceasing Inspiration

Shabana Azmi is not just a personality, she is a movement. An astoundingly talented actress, an equally impressionable politician and a relentless crusader for change, she simply inspires all of us. As an actor, she infused her roles with depth and intensity from her very first film, and today, her name is synonymous with some of the best and most meaningful films in Indian cinema. With just an arch of her brow and the powerful gaze in her eyes, she can articulate innumerable emotions. Yet, she has used her strong voice for many causes, working diligently both at the grassroots level and in the political arena.

“Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* marked the beginning of my political work with women's issues,” says Shabana. “After the film women started coming to my house and relating to me not as fans to a star but in sisterhood, they expected me to resolve all their marital problems for which I was not prepared at all. I was merely an actor who had done a part. It came as a stunning surprise to me how seriously people take your image from the film and the distinction between the character and the actor becomes so blurred. That really marked the beginning of my involvement with women's issues.”

Gautam Ghosh's *Paar* marked the beginning of her political involvement with the slums in Bombay and Shabana is involved with them even today. “There was a woman on the set who was a sweeper and I was using her as a role model. We became friends and one day she took me to her house and I saw the abject poverty she lived in. I felt at that time that if I went back and didn't attempt to do anything for the life of people like her then it would be a travesty of the trust she placed in me,” she says.

Shabana consciously chose to be the initiator of change. Realizing nonetheless what her father, the renowned Urdu poet, Kaifi Azmi had said to her, “When you are working for change you should build into that expectation the possibility that the change may not occur in your lifetime and yet, you have to carry on working. If you do that, there will be no frustration.”

Shabana has adopted a village called Mijwan in Uttar Pradesh, India. She speaks about women's empowerment, education, economic independence, the right to make decisions and employment generation in the rural areas. She wishes economic growth is fostered in India in all sections of society - when it is not about the rich getting richer and poor getting poorer. She wishes for social justice, opportunity of all irrespective of gender, caste, religion and equality of opportunity.

Despite being a powerful voice in politics, Shabana finds that

her not being part of a political party is both a strength and a weakness. “I have the freedom to raise any issue without fear but I can just raise awareness and don't have the party back-up to ensure implementation,” she says.

Amongst several accolades, Shabana has won five prestigious National Awards for her outstanding performances in Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1972), Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* (1982), *Khandar* (1984), *Paar* (1985) and *Godmother* (1999). Most recently she was also honored with the ReelWorld Award for Excellence in Toronto.

On the choice of roles, she says, “What moves me is not just the politics of the film but how it would translate into celluloid. Sometimes, it's the role. Other times, the issue needs awareness and I am willing to be the vehicle for that awareness. Sometimes, it's money or that I just want to have a ball.”

Just like Shabana has been giving meaningful roles to cinema, her husband the celebrated lyricist, Javed Akhtar has been stirring commercial films with meaningful poetry. “I inspire him,” she is quick to quip. Coming from similar family backgrounds, she believes she shares the same worldview with her husband. “We both have the same interests and we influence each other. My decisions are my own but I do consult him.”

Despite all her accomplishments, Shabana does dream of becoming an accomplished cook. She reveals, “If you were cooking the most divine dish and ask me to stir the pot for two

minutes, by the time you return it will certainly get burnt. I am such a foody and I ask for recipes as if I was a gourmet cook but I cannot cook”.

Most recently Shabana has appeared in Mahesh Dattani's *Morning Raga*, which ran to packed houses at a Gala presentation at the 2005 ReelWorld Fifth Anniversary Film Festival. She can be seen next in *Waterborne*, a hate crime film shot in L.A. in which she plays a Sikh woman and in Aparna Sen's *15 Park Avenue* where she plays the elder sister of Konkana Sen Sharma.

Shabana who has worked both nationally and internationally feels that colored people have just started appearing in Hollywood. On the other hand, technical competence is increasing in Indian cinema but there is still less attention to script. She also feels that the working woman is invisible in Indian cinema. “We have been through the phase of Rambos and Rambolinas. We need more visibility for working women,” she says. She cites Rani Mukherjee in *Black* and Tabu in her films as incredible performers.

Shabana believes that five years from now she will still be doing what she is doing today. Despite all the cinematic recognition and awards, she feels, “It is really about finding the truth of the character”. And, may we add, the quest for change. AV

WORDS PREETI THANDI