

Classic Poetry Series

Meena Kumari
- poems -

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Meena Kumari(1 August 1932 - 31 March 1972)

Meena Kumari (Hindi: मीना कुमारी), born Mahjabeen Bano, was an Indian movie actress and poetess. She is regarded as one of the most prominent actresses to have appeared on the screens of Hindi Cinema. During a career spanning 30 years from her childhood to her death, she starred in more than ninety films, many of which have achieved classic and cult status today.

Kumari gained a reputation for playing grief-stricken and tragic roles, and her performances have been praised and reminisced throughout the years. Like one of her best-known roles, Chhoti Bahu, in Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam (1962), Kumari became addicted to alcohol. Her life and prosperous career were marred by heavy drinking, troubled relationships, an ensuing deteriorating health, and her death from liver cirrhosis in 1972.

Kumari is often cited by media and literary sources as "The Tragedy Queen", both for her frequent portrayal of sorrowful and dramatic roles in her films and her real-life story.

 Early Life

Meena Kumari was the third daughter of Ali Baksh and Iqbal Begum; Khursheed and Madhu were her two elder sisters. At the time of her birth, her parents were unable to pay the fees of Dr. Gadre, who had delivered her, so her father left her at a Muslim orphanage, however, he picked her up after a few hours.

Her father, a Shia Muslim, was a veteran of Parsi theater, played harmonium, taught music, and wrote Urdu poetry. He played small roles in films like Id Ka Chand and composed music for films like Shahi Lutere.

Her mother was the second wife of Ali Baksh. Before meeting and then marrying Ali Baksh, she was a stage actress and dancer, under the stage name, Kamini.

 Early Work

When Mahjabeen was born, Ali Bakhsh aspired to get roles as an actor in Rooptara Studios. At the urging of his wife, he got Mahjabeen too into movies despite her protestations of wanting to go to school. Young Mahjabeen is said to have said, "I do not want to work in movies; I want to go to school, and learn like other children."

As Mahjabeen embarked on her acting career at the age of 7, she was renamed Baby Meena. Farzand-e-Watan or Leatherface (1939) was her first movie, which was directed for Prakash Studios by Vijay Bhatt. She became practically the sole breadwinner of her family during the 1940s. Her early adult acting, under the name Meena Kumari, was mainly in mythological movies like Veer Ghatotkach (1949), Shri Ganesh Mahima (1950), and fantasy movies like Alladin and The Wonderful Lamp (1952).

 Breakthrough

Meena Kumari gained fame with her role as a heroine in Vijay Bhatt's Baiju Bawra (1952). This heroine always negated herself for the material and spiritual advancement of the man she loved and was even willing to annihilate herself to provide him the experience of pain so that his music would be enriched. She became the first actress to win the Filmfare Best Actress Award in 1953 for this performance.

Meena Kumari highly successfully played the roles of a suffering woman in Parineeta (1953), Daera (1953), Ek Hi Raasta (1956), Sharda (1957), and Dil Apna Aur Preet Parayi (1960). Though she cultivated the image of a tragedienne, she also performed commendably in a few light-hearted movies like Azaad (1955), Miss Mary (1957), Shararat (1959), and Kohinoor (1960).

One of her best-known roles was in Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam (1962), which was produced by Guru Dutt. Kumari played Chhoti Bahu, an alcoholic wife. The film was a major critical and commercial success, which was attributed by critics to Kumari's performance, which is regarded as one of the best performances of Hindi Cinema. The role was famous for its uncanny similarity to Meena Kumari's own life. At that time, she herself was on a road to gradual ruin in her own personal life. Like her character, she began to drink heavily, though she carried on. In 1962, she made history by getting all the three nominations for Filmfare Best Actress Award, for her roles in Aarti, Main Chup Rahungi, and Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam. She won the award for Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam. wrote about her performance,

"While each of the performances are spot on, if there is one person who is the heart and soul of the film, it is Meena Kumari. Her portrayal of Chhoti Bahu is perhaps the greatest performance ever seen on the Indian Screen. The sequence where Chhoti Bahu dresses for her husband singing Piya Aiso Jiya Main is a poignant exploration of a woman's expectations and sexual desire. And later on when she has become a desperate alcoholic, you cannot help but cry with her in the sequence where she pleads with her husband to stay with her and then

angrily turns on him to tell him how she has prostituted her basic values and morals to please him. However the common factors between the actress's life and Chhoti Bahu are too dramatic to be merely coincidental - The estranged marital relationship, the taking of alcohol, turning towards younger male company, the craving to be understood and loved - all elements evident in Meena Kumari's own life."

 Later Work

For four more years, Kumari performed successfully in Dil Ek Mandir (1963), Kaajal (1965), and Phool Aur Patthar (1966), all of which earned her Filmfare nominations, with Kaajal garnering her a fourth and last win of the Best Actress award. However, after divorcing her husband in 1964, her addiction to alcohol became stronger, and she often dulled her senses with liquor. She also relied more and more on intimate relationships with younger men like Dharmendra. Her subsequent releases, including Chandan Ka Palna and Majhli Didi did not do well.

Kumari's heavy drinking had badly damaged her liver, and in 1968 she fell seriously ill. She was taken to London and Switzerland for treatment. Back home, she started settling her debts and made peace with her estranged sister, Madhu, whom she had not spoken to for two years. Because of her heavy drinking, she increasingly lost her good looks, and when she returned, she began playing character roles in movies like Jawab (1970) and Dushman (1972).

She developed an attachment to writer-lyricist Gulzar and acted in his directorial debut Mere Apne (1971). Kumari presented an acclaimed portrayal of an elderly woman who got caught between two street gangs of frustrated, unemployed youth and got killed, her death making the youth realise the futility of violence.

Pakeezah, starring Kumari and directed by her ex-husband Kamal Amrohi, took 14 years to reach the silver screen. First planned by Amrohi in 1958, the film went on the studio floors in 1964, but the shooting came to a standstill after their separation in March 1964, when it was more than halfway complete. In 1969, Sunil Dutt and Nargis previewed some reels of the shelved film and convinced the estranged Amrohi and Kumari to complete it. Hindustan Times described the meeting which Dutt had organised between the two:

"Not much was said, but streams of tears were shed... Amrohi greeted her with a token payment of a gold guinea and the promise that he'd make her look as beautiful as the day she had started the film."

Gravelly ill, Kumari was determined to complete the film and, well aware of the

limited time left for her to live, went out of her way to complete it at the earliest. Despite her rapidly deteriorating health, she gave the finishing touches to her performance. Initially, after its release in February 1972, Pakeezah opened to a lukewarm response from the public; however, after Meena Kumari's death less than two months later, people flocked to see it, making it a major box-office success. The film has since gained a cult and classic status, and Kumari's performance as a golden-hearted Lucknow prostitute drew major praise. She posthumously received her twelfth and last Filmfare nomination.

Throughout her life, Kumari had a love-hate relationship with movies, and besides being a top-notch actress, she was a talented poetess, and recorded a disc of her Urdu poems, I write, I recite with music by Khayyam.

 Death

Three weeks after the release of Pakeezah, Meena Kumari became seriously ill, and died on 31 March 1972 of liver cirrhosis. At her death, she was in more or less the same financial circumstance as her parents at the time of her birth: It is said that when she died in a nursing home, there was no money to pay her hospital bills. She was buried at Rahematabad Qabristan located at Narialwadi, Mazgaon, Mumbai.

 Relationship with Kamal Amrohi

In 1952, on the sets of one of her films, Meena Kumari fell in love with and married film director, Kamal Amrohi, who was fifteen years elder than her and was already married. She wrote about Amrohi:

"Dil saa jab saathi paya
Bechaini bhi woh saath le aaya"

(When I found someone like my heart
He also brought sorrow with him)

Soon after marriage, Kamal Amrohi and Meena Kumari produced a film called Daera (1953), which was based on their love story. They also planned another film, Pakeezah. However, it took sixteen years (1956 to 1972) before Pakeezah reached the silver screen. (The scenes in Pakeezah's popular song, Inhi logon ne, were originally filmed in black and white, and were later reshot in color.)

It is said that Amrohi did not want children with Meena Kumari because she was not a Syed. They raised Kamal Amrohi's son, Tajdaar, who was greatly attached

to his chhoti ammi (younger mother).

Due to their strong personalities, however, Meena Kumari and Kamal Amrohi started to develop conflicts, both professionally and in their married life. Their conflicts led to separation in 1960, and ultimately divorce in 1964. Highly affected Meena Kumari, who, once a happy woman, became depressed and found solace in heavy drinking. They remarried, but Meena Kumari had become an alcoholic by then.

She expressed her sorrows prominently in her poetry. About Kamal Amrohi she wrote:

"Tum kya karo ge sun kar mujh se meri kahani
Bay lutf zindagi ke qissay hain pheekay pheekay"

(Why do you want to listen to my story:
Colourless tales of a joyless life)

At the time of the divorce, she wrote:

"Talaaq to day rahay ho Nazar-e-qehar ke saath
Jawani bhi meri louta do Mehar ke saath"

(You are divorcing me with rage in your eyes
Return to me, also, my youth along with the alimony!)

Ablapa Koi Is Dasht Main Aya Hoga

Meena Kumari

Agaz To Hota Hai Anjam Nahin Hota

Meena Kumari

Chand Tanha Hai Asman Tanha

Meena Kumari

Meraa Maazii

Meena Kumari

Puchte Ho To Suno Kaise Basar Hoti Hai

Meena Kumari

Tukre Tukre Din Biitaa, Dhajjii Dhajjii Raat Mili

Meena Kumari

Ye Nuur Kaisaa Hai

Meena Kumari

Ye Rat Ye Tanhai

Meena Kumari

Yun Teri Rahguzar Se Diwana War Guzre

Meena Kumari