

Rekha Jhanji:

The Passing of an Era

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A period of lockdown, a period of turmoil, a current world scenario when a disturbing chronicle rises from its ashes, is plaguing us by its sheer absurdity. The impossibility of resistance in its face, calling into question familiar assumptions, material, metaphysical and ontological -- to write about Prof. Rekha Jhanji. Her lifelong project to take measure of our values, embracing a philosophy that makes us contemplate our place in the world while somehow still take pleasure in it, would be a gargantuan task. Prof. Jhanji was suffering with Alzheimer's for almost a decade and passed away on May 8.

Professor and scholar of Aesthetics, Hermeneutics, Existentialism and

Phenomenology Prof. Jhanji taught for almost four decades in the Dept. Of Philosophy at Panjab University. A familiar figure at Panjab University, she doffed many caps and significant positions in the course of her career. She was President of the Ethics and Social Philosophy Section of the All India Philosophical Congress at Waltair, President of Indian Philosophical Congress, Consulting Editor for Indian Philosophical Quarterly, Fellow and Executive Editor, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and Coordinator of Centre for Vivekananda Studies in 2002- 2005. Her work was published in prominent journals such as Comparative Aesthetics, Contemporary European Philosophy and Philosophy of Mind

and her books are widely read and on the reading list of courses in Indian Aesthetics in various universities in India and abroad.

Prof. Jhanji earned her second PhD from the University of Paris in 1970s post 'Mai 1968' writing on Jean Paul Sartre initially. She sat in the very same café frequented by Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. She had an apprehension that she would lose the magic of a thinker, should he turn out disappointing in person; she never walked up to Sartre's table to tell him she was writing her dissertation on him.

Prof. Jhanji's classes, texts, cast of characters and thinkers were diverse and fascinating. She unravelled the threads of the fascinating dhvani theory and the resonant field of emotions and poetry in her compellingly effortless lectures on Anandvardhana's Dhvanyaloka. Her study about the role of the sensuous in art critiquing the spiritualization of rasa brought forth the voice of artists whose work she studied; a fascinating raconteur, her quest to discern the aesthetic meaning morphing in different ways. The 'silver threads of the aesthetic and

the religious' were taking root in her mind for long.

In our twenties, life pulsed with enthusiasm and to love philosophy was not an alien idea; some of us fell deeply in love with the subject and with her. She was full of verve, erudite, imaginative and above all held that one elusive quality that was the fabric of her being—she made you feel larger than life—even in her treatment of callow and unstructured writing; constantly weeding out arguments that could mislead, feeding arguments that could become insights.

Athens was devastated by a plague during the Peloponnesian War its anguish prised open by Lucretius in his "On the nature of Things", a propos taking invisible bullets; pitiless ammo, invisible and unfeeling, testing. Sealed city gates blazing emblems of imposed borders symbolically got embedded in Albert Camus's allegorical work *The Plague* in 1949 weaving vivid metaphors and imageries of different positions taken by the French amidst the peak of the French Resistance and the Nazi occupation. Remembering Prof. Jhanji in a time when freedom is becoming the biggest riddles of our

times, her narrative of the delights of Avant Garde Paris and cafes that spilled political consciousness giving voice to the mood of the day, would be the blazing dream of every person in exile, in the face of a pandemic. A memory that serves no purpose would have not been Prof. Rekha Jhanji's humanist problem. She would not have given permission to despair or permit indifference, she would have invoked fortitude and that one wait to articulate the world in the experiential structure, abiding in the idea of care.

The world of philosophy is forever going to be indebted to one of its most luminous scholars and for her moral fibre, breaking every barrier literally in the "aristocracy of sex" in the world of Philosophy; where women thinkers find it hard to thrive. An era has passed, and on behalf of the philosophy fraternity I wish to offer to a beloved teacher, scholar and a wonderful human being, salutations to her sojourn in life!

Select Publications by Prof. Rekha Jhanji

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“The Concept of Art: A Revindication”, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*: 4: 327-331, 1976.

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