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Parveen Shakir: A Note and Twelve Poems

A MOST INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT in Urdu literature since 1947 has been the emergence of an increasing number of women poets who have contributed to Urdu poetry what, several generations earlier, other women had to Urdu fiction: a more intimately feminine voice and a range of themes containing what had not been expressed before—a woman's experience within the Urdu-speaking urban milieu. It is noteworthy that this development occurred in Pakistan, where an average Muslim woman's life has been much more restricted in certain ways than in India. Perhaps it reflects the creative power of the challenges in Pakistan less than the decline in Urdu education in India, where, one suspects, Muslim women poets of this kind are more likely to come forth in literatures other than Urdu. Be that as it may, there is a triad of Pakistani women poets whose individual talents must receive primary credit. Parveen Shakir is the youngest of the three, the other two—chronologically senior to her—being Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz. Naheed and Riaz created the space within which Shakir's poetry successfully found its own voice.

Shakir has so far published four books of poetry. Each contains *ġazals* as well as *naẓms*. The *ġazal* demands a language that is ruthlessly concise yet rich in suggestiveness; it also requires its listeners/readers to bring to it their own experiential specificity, context, and elaboration, as well as their own acquired literary knowledge. The *naẓm*, on the other hand, allows the poet to elaborate: the poet often strings out specific contexts and invites us to keep company as he or she discovers the poem in that process. These are two quite different modes of perception and creation. Shakir is good at both. Her *ġazals* are a noteworthy contribution to Urdu literature in their own right, some of them carrying the vivid impress of a

distinctively feminine voice. The latter is reflected not merely in the consistent use of a grammatical feminine gender or the references to feminine attire and social contexts, but in something much more, as in the couplet:

*dil tō čamak sakēgā kyā, p^hir b^hi tarāš-kē dēk^h
lēñ
ššā-garān-e šabr kē hāt^h kā ye kamāl b^hi*
It's doubtful that our heart would be
made brilliant, but let's go get it cut
anyway,
Let's have this experience too of the
mastery of the city's crystal-carvers.

I may be wrong, but I feel that this verse, with its rare use of the intransitive but active *tarāš-kē* could arise only from a sensibility anchored in a woman's experience in Urdu society.

By the time Shakir's first collection, *Xušbū*, appeared in 1977, she was already well known through magazines and *mušā'iras*. The book went through a second printing within six months, a rare honor for any book in Urdu, and has remained in print since then. It contains an interesting introduction by the poet, entitled "From the Flower's Casement." This is how it begins:

On the crumbling threshold of fleet-footed moments, holding on to the arms of the wind, a girl stands and wonders: what should she tell you? Years ago, in the still hours of some night, she had prayed to God that He should reveal to her the girl inside her. I am sure God must have smiled, at least once, at the simplicity of that prayer—girls of tender age don't know that no greater calamity befalls those who dwell on earth than self-knowledge—but He granted her the request. And so, at an age when others wish for the moon, she received the magic word that would let her into the thousand-gated city of the Self.

This is highly mannered prose, much too precious, but one cannot help admiring the confidence with which it was used by the young author.

What is more interesting here is the poet's description of herself. She calls herself a "girl" (*laṛkī*), not a "woman" (*aurat*), and later we discover that she seems as much aware of her charms as she is of her young age.

She expects to be loved and desired by someone, just as she herself wants to love and desire another. She is determined that the two experiences must be equally honestly felt and given a voice. Later in the Introduction, she explains the title of the book: “When the breeze kissed the flower, fragrance [*xuṣbū*] was born.” She is the “flower,” and her poems emerge out of the encounters with the “breeze,” with those who are drawn to her. But the poems are not mannered; in fact, many have a certain throw-away charm to them. That is as true of the simple lines of “To a Friend” in her first book of poems as of the delightful minuet of a poem, “To a Victorian Man” in her third book.

By pointing to Shakir’s use of the word *larkī* (girl) for herself, I don’t mean to imply that it is something special to her alone. If anything, it is special to all the women poets of the post-1947 generation; they self-consciously use the word, with all its connotations of innocence, playfulness, budding sexuality, societally expected gender roles, etc. The earlier women poets mostly spoke in the adult’s voice of high seriousness, no different from their male counterparts. On the other hand, in contrast to the women, men wrote, and still write, about childhood, but seldom about “boyhood,” certainly never about adolescent sexuality and gender roles. Incidentally, the latter topic was present even in the poems of Muhammadi Begum, in the first decade of this century, though not as something to question or even to examine. (Girls were/are expected to become mothers, but fatherhood was/is never mentioned in the context of a boy’s future.)

One may note here a poem from Shakir’s first volume. Entitled “*Mas’ala*” (The Problem), it describes an encounter with Fahmida Riaz, who tells her:

Parveen, as I watched you read
I remembered my old self—
the days when I’d write like you.
But now those poems are faint dreams;
I’ve ‘disowned’ all of them.

Her own hands held in the “jasmine-soft” hands of the senior poet, Shakir wonders if the “simple ‘Alice’ inside her” would ever be able to “disown” herself. She doubts it very much. As she puts it in another poem, “*Tanqīd aur Taxliq*” (Criticism and Creativity), “I don’t wish that my art / grow old before it’s young.”

Her second volume is entitled *Ṣadbarg* (Marigold, 1980). That is not,

however, the common Urdu name for the flower, and thus its use here is ambivalent. The word literally means “hundred petals” and as such it may also imply an experience of being torn apart. This is evident in the increased bitterness in many of the poems in that collection. There are also many more poems that are overtly socio-political in reference. Her third book, *Xud-Kalāmī* (Soliloquy, 1984), is dedicated to her son, Murad. As may be expected, in addition to further explorations of love and desire and separation and disillusionment, it also contains a number of poems dealing with the experience of becoming and being a mother. These are joyful poems, full of energy and confidence. But the eponymous final poem is a cry of pain, the poet being no longer sure of any possibility of human communication. These same themes continue in the fourth book, *Inkār* (Refusal, 1990), which also contains a section entitled “Prose Poems.” These differ from the rest, however, only in being somewhat prosaic in their language.

As one goes through Shakir’s four volumes, one is struck by the autobiographical tone of much of her poetry. One also feels that the poems were arranged in the books in almost the chronological order of their composition. Thus one may read in them the growth of the “girl” into a “wife,” a “mother,” and finally a “woman” who is a wife/mother/poet/wage earner and much more. She doesn’t, however, write in a confessional mode; there is not in her poetry much in the way of deep psychological probings or a struggle with one’s own demons. In that sense, Shakir’s poetry is fairly tranquil. At most, she seems merely to confide in us, gently. Since these confidences—generally in terms of feelings and ideas, not individualized experiences—are direct and heartfelt, they make for attractive enough poems. When they are also enhanced by a particularized context, a telling detail or a precise image, they become memorable.

Urdu poets (male or male-voiced) conventionally adopted the persona of a lover. In fact, as lovers, they sometimes appeared to be independent of any beloved, and entirely enthusiastic about “Love” alone. Shakir and other women poets write about a love that is neither self-enthusiastic nor self-engrossed, it cherishes reciprocity and, while it lasts, is notably mutual. Their desire to love goes hand in hand with a desire to be loved. What often comes as the greatest surprise to an unaccustomed Urdu reader is the palpable sensuality in some of their poems; it is of a different order from that attempted by any male poet in Urdu. Come to think of it, I cannot immediately recall any genuinely sensuous poem in Urdu by a male poet, except for one or two by Miraji. It appears to me

that for most male poets in Urdu the consummation of love seems to be either a sexual conquest or a transcendental experience—in either instance lacking in any expression of mutuality.

Further, the new women poets, including Shakir, have written on a range of experiences within marital love which no male poet ever wrote about in Urdu. Sexual intimacy, pregnancy, childbirth, infidelity, separation and divorce—these are topics that one would look for in vain in the books of contemporary male poets, not to mention their predecessors. To give one example, only due to these women poets do we now have some fine poems on the experience of being a mother; sad to say, no male poet has yet written in Urdu a poem about being a father. (There are, of course, any number of hortatory poems by male poets addressed to “sons.”)

Some other interesting poems scattered through her four books deal with the experience of being a woman poet in a male-dominated society. These deal with patronizing senior poets (male and female), predatory critics and intellectuals, and other somewhat familiar, though—for Urdu—not much written about, topics. One poem which is unusually effective is entitled “*Navīṣṭa*” (It Has Been Written . . .). In it she tries to explain to her young son why he shouldn’t feel embarrassed if most people seem to know him as “the poet’s son” rather than the father’s. By putting a quotation from the Arabic at the beginning, Shakir has made her particular experience timeless within the Urdu/Islamic milieu of her poetry.

The language of Shakir’s poems may be ornate, literary or simple, but it is never overly colloquial. There is always an impression of care and restraint, particularly in the *ġazals*. There may be echoes of other voices—Faiz and Ahmad Faraz, to name the more obvious—but even a cursory reading of her poetry makes it evident that these are only echoes, not imitations. One is particularly impressed by the precision and economy of expression in her *ġazals*. That is sometimes not the case in the *nazms*, particularly the longish ones. For example in the political poem entitled “*Šāhzādī kā Alamiya*” (The Princess’s Tragedy), one gets the feeling that the long preceding section was written after the “poem” of the final five lines had been conceived. In other words, the poem didn’t discover itself as the poet wrote it. Contrast this with the equally political but more organically conceived poem “For the Iranian Poetess, Farugh Farrukhzad” or the delightfully sardonic “What Will Happen to Flowers?”

Now that Faiz has long faded from her horizon, Shakir may do well

to turn to the other two great masters of the post-Iqbal generation: Miraji and N.M. Rashed. The former can lead her into the anguish and pleasures of “confessions” while the latter can teach anyone a great deal about creating and sustaining tonal and ideational complexity within a single long poem. These remarks are not meant to take anything away from Shakir’s quite significant achievement in Urdu verse, but merely aim to suggest a task worthy of her. Shakir is a prolific writer: over six hundred *ġazals* and *nazms* in the four published collections. But in every one of those collections, there are enough finely crafted poems to reward even an exacting reader. It’s not the copious output but these more sharply realized poems that raise Shakir above the rank of most of her contemporaries, male or female.

Poems

A SIMPLE REQUEST

Lord, I know the duty of a hostess,
but please let it be that this year
either rain clouds visit me
or my loneliness.

OBSTINATE

Why should I be the first to phone?
He knows too:
last night came the first monsoon.

TO A FRIEND

Listen, girl, these moments are clouds:
you let them pass and they’re gone.
Soak up their moist touch. Get
drenched.
Don’t waste a single drop.
Listen, downpours don’t remember
streets,
and sunshine can’t read road signs.

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

Will you too be like others:
put yesterday's dark against today's
bright?
Well, please yourself . . . but bear in
mind:
they also charge: the sun sleeps with
night!

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO FLOWERS?

I hear
butterflies will again be banished,
and bees will get pollen mailed to
them—
“They mustn't flit from rose to rose!”
And breeze will have to watch its step.
Bees, butterflies, even breeze
shall see only whom the law approves.
But,
did anyone think of the flower's fate?
How many can self-pollinate?

A POEM FOR THE IRANIAN POETESS,
FARUGH FARRUKHZAD (1934–1967)

Please tell our lord, the king's good
friend,
that His Holiness came today and
confirmed:
the crop of sinners is ripe again.
Tell him, his reapers stand ready.
They wait to be told which hands to
cut,
which tongues to slash, which fields to
burn.
They want to know the names of the [...]

doomed.
They should be told which woman to
stone,
which child to impale on a virile man.
They wait to learn the names of the
killers
who must receive the benefit of the
doubt,
and the innocents who should be
hanged?
But tell our lord to bear in mind
this one request:
he must always give verbal orders;
writing only causes headaches.

IT HAS BEEN WRITTEN . . .

“ . . . then Zaid cursed Bakar, ‘Your mother
is more well known than your father!’ ”

My son,
this curse is your fate too.
In a fathers’ world you too, one day,
must pay a heavy price
for being known by your mother,
though your eyes’ color, your brow’s
expanse,
and all the curves your lips create
come from the man
who shared with me in your birth,
yet alone gives you significance
in the eyes of the law-givers.

But the tree that nurtured you three
seasons
must claim one season as its own,
to comb the stars, turn thoughts into
perfumes,
make poems leapfrog your ancestors’ walls . . . [..]

a season that Mira couldn't send away,
nor could Sappho.

Now it must be this family's fate
that you should frequently feel abashed
before your playmates, and that your
father
must grin and bear it among his friends.
The name on the doorbell means
nothing;
the world knows you by one name
alone.

A BIT OF ADVICE

If
in the course of a conversation
gaps of silence begin to occur,
spoken words turn silent;
therefore, my eloquent friend,
let's carefully listen
to this silence.

I'M HAPPY TO REMAIN A BUTTERFLY

Midnight of my passing years
Did someone knock on the mute
shutters
or was I scared in a dream?

What house of love is this?
Such frightening rocks litter its base,
its windowpanes already chatter.
Perhaps the dread lies inside me
more than anywhere out there.
My dread of his handsome looks,
my awe of his mind,
my fear of a dance of wild abandon [...]

before his pursuing eyes
Mere covers.

I don't wish to say: "There he is."
Why should I lose what years have
gained:
my life of freedom, my free mind?
I know if I ever fell into his hands
he'd swiftly turn me into a housefly.
Confined to the walls of his desires,
I'd forget I had ever known
the joys of light, breeze and perfume.

Yes, I'm happy to remain a butterfly:
though life's needs conspire against me
at least my wings are still intact.

POEM

How long did we sit engrossed in talk
under the flowering jacaranda tree?
I don't know. I only know,
the moon crept out from behind the
tree
and placed its fingers across our eyes.

TO A VICTORIAN MAN

Instead of keeping me tucked away
in some safe corner of your heart—
instead of struggling with Victorian
manners,
in the days of Elizabeth II—
instead of combing world literature
to create one-word conversations—
instead of a vigil below my window
at every Spring's first dawn—
just step forward [..]

one day, out of nowhere,
and gathering me inside your arms
turn a perfect circle on your heels.

WHO THEN HAD THE TIME TO MEET
HERSELF?

That I'd manage to glue together the
slivers
of my shattered pride,
repair the tattered wings of my aborted
flights,
and obtain my body's leave to bid you
farewell—
I didn't know.
I had learned so little about myself.
Otherwise this ritual of saying goodbyes
could have ended long ago;
I could've found my courage earlier.
But who then had the time to meet herself?