

An Evening of Caged Beasts
(A Review Article)

An Evening of Caged Beasts: Seven Postmodernist Urdu Poets. Selected and introduced by ASIF FARRUKHI. Translated by FRANCES W. PRITCHETT and ASIF FARRUKHI. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999. xxxiii, 248 pp.

THIS book presents selections from the works of Pakistani poets belonging to the younger generation (born between 1946 and 1961) who never banded together though they “were all within the same radius” (p. xiii), namely, Afzal Ahmad Syed, Azra Abbas, Sarwat Hussain, Sara Shagufta, Zeeshan Sahil, Tanveer Anjum and Saiduddin. In the “Editor’s Introduction,” Asif Farrukhi describes the basis for his selections. The main motivating force was his identification with them as poets representing his generation. He acknowledges a close personal involvement with their poetry—“as a reader, as a writer, as a book-reviewer, and as a ‘watcher’ of the poetry scene” (p. xii). What he draws attention to first, however, is not this personal element but the “family resemblance” (p. x) in the poetic diction of the works he has selected. The most conspicuous characteristic of the poems brought together in this volume is their totally “anti-classical” or “non-classical” idiom, the common point of departure for the seven poets being a “fresh start for poetry” (p. xi). The editor not only states this fact, he explains the reason: They adopted this particular style to get closer to things and to the “ordinary, common man” whose “anguish, sense of dispossession, ironic stance and horror seemed to be beyond words. The strong tradition of rhetoric, which survives well into modern Urdu poetry, *could not give expression to these feelings*. What was needed was more direct and open poetry—one closer to the raw edge of

life” (p. viii; emphasis added). According to Farrukhi, this style was mainly developed by the seven poets he has chosen.

I have quoted so extensively from the introduction because, to my mind, at least one point in the argument is debatable. The need or urge to express ardent feelings of despair, rage, disillusionment, etc. directly, is understandable enough. But this does not mean that expressing them in the oblique, abstract, generalized manner of classical poetry is impossible. The latter is certainly another mode of expression, calling for at least one more stage of processing, a further distillation or condensation, so to speak. What perhaps also prompted the authors to adopt a more direct style was the particular way in which poetry in the classical mode, and especially the *ghazal*, is received. The sound qualities of the *ghazal* and the familiar rhetorical devices used in *ghazal* poetry allow for an immediate effect which does not necessarily demand much intellectual activity on the part of the listener or, though to a lesser degree, the reader. Modern, direct poetry compels the reader or listener to engage in an intellectual act, and this is perhaps exactly what these modern poets want.

But let us now turn to the “postmodernist” label attached to these seven poets. Farrukhi explains that in the given context it denotes not only a break with the classical tradition, but with the “tradition of the modern” as well (p. ix). Therefore here “postmodernist” is used not so much as a theoretical term, but as an umbrella term to group together a generation of poets united by a particular poetic diction, although not organized in any school or movement and with no common agenda or manifesto other than this particular style which makes them even imitative of each other in their “weaker unguarded moments” (p. ix). Farrukhi characterizes their work in the following way: “Their poetry is more raw than cooked, to use a somewhat oversimplified distinction. Their choice of contents is mundane, deliberately commonplace,” the language “is bare, stripped to the essential core [This may be true for some of the works—e.g., those by Azra Abbas or Afzal Ahmad Syed—but not for all authors!], and at times even pedestrian...” (p. ix). All this may make for really refreshing, unconventional poetry—but also for rather bad poetry, if the material remains too “raw.” Here as well as elsewhere in the introduction, Farrukhi hints at some of the weaknesses of the poets included in the volume. Presumably he did not select their weaker poems for translation, but this the readers will have to judge for themselves.

Understandably enough, the kind of poetry presented here does not stand a chance of becoming popular. As mentioned earlier, it is totally unsuitable for simple, thoughtless consumption. Therefore we need not

expect these poets to be known by the “common reader.” (Should one not better say “the common listener” or “*mushā’ira-goer*”?) But is it appropriate to locate them in a “subculture of their own” (p. xi)? The circles in which they move may have some features of the shady milieu of the “bohème,” but is it not, at the same time, quite an élitist culture of Karachiite intellectuals, particularly the literati? Is it not one of the common features of all modern Urdu poetry that it became élitist whenever it moved away from the familiar structures, images and sound patterns of classical poetry?

Farrukhi’s introduction is followed by detailed information on each of the authors and their work, including a good deal of the editor’s interpretation and evaluation of their poetry. A short “Translator’s Introduction” and a section of valuable bibliographic information round out the prefatory segment of the book.

Before turning to the poems and their translations, let me comment briefly on one of Pritchett’s remarks in the “Translator’s Introduction.” Stressing the accessibility of these poems, Pritchett describes them as “transparent rather than opaque,” which has enabled her to produce translations “that are faithful usually line for line and often almost word for word” (p. xxi). So far so good, her English translations really do succeed in conveying the mood and the expression of the poems quite faithfully, but does this make the poems transparent? To my mind, quite a number of them are transparent only on the surface. That is, you can understand every word of the poem, but you don’t necessarily grasp the meaning. They don’t necessarily make sense to you. When I read the “Translator’s Introduction” I immediately remembered the article Pritchett wrote with S.R. Faruqi titled “Lyric Poetry in Urdu Ghazal and Nazm” (*Journal of South Asian Literature*, XIX/2, 1984:111–27) where the authors speak of the “obscurity” of modern poetry. The following lines from it come to mind as an appropriate explanation for the difficulty one may face reading some of the poems in the present volume.

While older nazms depended on scattered, separate metaphors, so that there was no difficulty in understanding them, the modern poet uses aspect upon aspect of real events as metaphor, so that the whole nazm has the effect of a metaphor, and realistic description gives rise to obscurity. (p. 124)

This same obscurity is a feature of quite a few of the poems which appear here, despite their seemingly simple words and simple sentences.

But let us now turn to the poets in the order of their appearance in the book.

Afzal Ahmad Syed's poems correspond closely to the common characteristics delineated in the introduction. His pedestrian diction defies any existing norms for lofty, elevated language. Where we encounter conventional images at all, they are used in a way that sets them apart, almost turning them upside down. A good example of this technique is found in the short poem "If My Voice is Not Reaching You" (*Agar Tum Tak Mēri Āvāz Nahīn Pahuñc Rahī Hai*, pp. 47–8) which evokes the conventional images of a beautiful beloved (a *shahzādī!*) and a suffering lover, but with a very refreshing, unemotional, matter-of-fact tone. This combination produces an effective, touching poem.

The mood of Syed's poems oscillates between melancholia and resignation (Farrukhi speaks of a "quiet desperation," p. xiv), sometimes adopting a tone of self-accusation and occasionally showing flashes of rebellion—as in the last lines of "If They Should Learn" (*Agar Unhēñ Ma'lūm Ho Jā'ē*):

Even if they should learn
how we can be killed

even then they cannot kill us (p. 21)

agar unhēñ ma'lūm ho jā'ē
ke hamēñ kaisē mārā jā saktā hai

phir bhī vo hamēñ nahīn mār saktē (p. 22)

or in the opening poem "I Invented Poetry" (*Shā'eri Main Nē Ījād Kī*):

I sold all the poetry and bought fire
and burned up the hand of force (p. 3)

main nē sārī shā'eri bēc kar āg kharīdī
aur jabr kā hāt^h jalā diyā (p. 4)

Or, see the despondently rebellious note in "We Live Without Asking Anyone" (*Ham Kisī Sē Pūc^hē Baghair Rahtē Haiñ*) where again the last lines resemble a resumé or main point of the poem:

Then whenever we want
we'll stop the earth from moving
and start to dance

The heart of a dancing man
makes a difficult target (p. 33)

phir ham jab chahēngē
zamīn kī gardish rōk kar
raqṣ karnē lagēngē

načtē hū'ē ādmi kē dil kā nishāna
mushkil sē liyā jā saktā hai (p. 34)

An outstanding feature of Afzal Ahmad Syed's poetry, however, is the way he deals with the theme of the Holocaust from the perspective of the victims. The three poems on this subject focus less on the suffering of the victims, though this does form the background of the brief stories narrated in the poems, than on the attempts of the victims to preserve their humanity and their dignity in utterly inhuman circumstances. In addition to their intrinsic poetic value, these texts also have political value as they present a much needed voice of humanity and sanity when viewed in the context of the anti-Zionist, and often anti-Jewish, hysteria prevalent in some segments of the Pakistani press.

The next poet in the collection is Azra Abbas who, in Farrukhi's words, "writes the poetry of life's prose" (p. xvi)—a very apt description of her distinctive style. With her we find no romantic feeling, only the stark realities of household chores, of the double burden carried by working women, and of sexual desire and frustration. Yet there is room for dreams and for longings, however unromantically they may be presented. Azra Abbas opens our eyes to the hidden wonders and abysses of everyday life. She combines the private and the political, the concrete and the abstract, and is delightfully shameless in speaking about the unspeakable. I disagree with Farrukhi's observation that "it is still too early to comment on her ability (or the lack of it) to experiment with various forms, and to have at her command a wider range of emotions" (p. xvi). At least as far as her range of emotions is concerned, I see much more variety in her work than Farrukhi's statement would lead us to expect. Some of her poems clearly go beyond the realm of a mother and working woman's daily experience. Take for instance poems like "A Dot Might Appear" (*Kabīn Kō'ī Nuqṭa Ā Jā'ē*, pp. 69–70), "Another Life" (*Ēk Zindagī Aur Mil Jā'ē*, pp. 73–4), and "A Life Divided Into Pieces" (*Ṭukrōn Mēn Baṭī Hu'ī Zindagī*, pp. 73–4). The feeling of alienation and dispossession voiced in "A Life Divided Into Pieces" reflects a common human experi-

ence, cutting through the boundaries of gender and race. The first poem, “A Dot Might Appear,” defies any unequivocal interpretation. Instead it makes us wonder about, and even question, accepted perceptions and established priorities. It possesses a contemplative quality which is shared by many of her other poems which are, ostensibly, on more mundane themes.

Sarwat Hussain’s “A Poem Can Start From Anywhere” (*Ēk Nazm Kabīñ Sē Bhī Shurū‘ Hō Saktī Hai*, pp. 101–4) conveys confidence in the power of poetry, similar to the confidence voiced by Afzal Ahmad Syed. It brings poetry down to earth—not in order to limit its scope, but rather in order to invest it with unlimited capacities and ranges while always remaining poised to fly off again. I find the language of most of the poems by Hussain in this selection very prosaic, reaching an extreme in the prose poem “Until Evening Falls” (*Yahāñ Tak Ke Shām Hō Jātī Hai*, pp. 123–4) where the lines are even set like prose. (They could, however, have easily been split up into shorter lines to conform to the conventional shape of poetry.) Farrukhi stresses Hussain’s use of meter and rhyme in “concise, music-like compositions” (p. xv). But with this poem it becomes obvious that the difference between prose and poetry has much more to do with atmosphere and diction than with rhythm and rhyme. “Until Evening Falls” is as poetic as the next work, “At the Edge of a Difficult Day” (*Dushvār Dīn Kē Kinārē*, pp. 125–6), though they appear to be different on the surface. In the longer prose poem “I Want to Die the Death of a Man” (*Main Ēk Ādmī Kī Maut Marnā Čāhtā Hūñ*, pp. 127–8), the poetic sentiment develops from rather pedestrian and prosaic sentences in the first paragraph, to a strong rhythmic organization of the language by the third paragraph, ending in a crescendo of both words and emotions. A hymn-like poem about the Indus River, “Mehran, Give Me” (*Mehrān, Mujhē Dō*, pp. 131–2), along with the only *ghazal* included in the anthology conclude Sarwat Hussain’s section.

The next poet is Sara Shagufta and I should admit right at the outset that I have great difficulty comprehending some of her poems. One reason may be that I prefer short poems. Her long poetic compositions leave me confused about the different personae she presents. Farrukhi aptly characterized some of her poetry as “a continuous monologue, an incessant diary in which she kept piling up impression upon impression, image upon image,” cut through by lines “like quicksilver in sand” (p. xvii).

The first poem by Shagufta is titled “Half a Room” (*Ādhā Kamrā*, pp. 135–42). According to Farrukhi it is a “tirade against pretentious critics”

(p. xviii). To me, it is much more than this. It mirrors many of the attitudes of male intellectuals, be they critics, fellow-writers or whatever, towards women. Does “Half a Room” not allude to Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”? How painful it must be to be granted only half a room! But the persona of the poet strikes back, calling her adversaries names like “Half-Freud,” “Half-Rimbaud,” etc. (p. 137), and by revealing the shallowness of pseudo-intellectual prattle. The poem draws attention to the difficult position of women writers once they enter the “bohème,” as well as to the intrigues and jealousies, the hypocrisy and malice that can be found among ostensibly sophisticated men.

A striking feature of Shagufta’s poems is the frequent use of synaesthesia (Greek: *synaisthesis*), breaking down the conventional limits of the senses and thereby creating such new, highly evocative images as, for example, “stench and more stench / is alienating the taste of my eyes...” (*ṣarānd hī ṣarānd sē mēri āṅk^bōṅ kā / ṣā’eqa bad-rūḥ hō rahā hai...*), from “Lines From a Poem” (*Kaisē Ṭabaltā Hai Čānd*, pp. 145–8). Like classical poets, she often utilizes opposites and paradoxes, but in her work these seem to function as signs or symbols of protest rather than as mere rhetorical devices.

As mentioned earlier, for me much in Sara Shagufta’s texts remains dark and obscure. But every now and then some lines made a deep impression on me. For instance, the last two stanzas of “The House of Empty Eyes” (*Khālī Āṅk^bōṅ Kā Makān*):

Give the chains freedom
for man is more of a prison
than they are

I have to die alone
so
these eyes
this heart
 give them to some
 empty person (p. 153)

zanjīrōṅ kī [sic] rihā’i dō
ke insān in sē ziyāda qaid hai
muj^bē tanhā marnē hai
sō ye āṅk^bēṅ ye dil
kisī khālī insān kō dē dēnā (p. 154)

In contrast to Sara Shagufta's poems, Zeeshan Sahil's are usually shorter and overtly more lucid, which does not necessarily imply that they are easier to understand. Thematically they cover a wide range, from love and romance to the everyday experiences of an ordinary individual, from aesthetics and questions of representation to politics, seduction and oppression. Here too, writing itself turns into an act of revolt. In "Tyranny" (*Zulm*, pp. 183–4)¹ the motif of tyranny returns time and again, each time, however, viewed from a different angle and with a variety of nuances. Look, for instance, at the last lines of "King" (*Bādshāh*, pp. 195–6):

You are the sky,
you can fall on our homes

where we were born
with a wooden spoon
in our mouths,
more of a king
than any king (p. 195)

āp āsmān haiñ
hamārē gharōñ par gir saktē haiñ

jabāñ ham paidā hū`ē t̄hē
apnē muñh mēñ
lakṛī kā čamčā lē kē
kisī bādshāh sē ziyāda
bādshāh (p. 196)

Completely different is the mood of the poem "White Carpet" (*Safēd Qālīn*, pp. 175–6) which has to be felt by each reader in his own way. We may see in it the awe inspired by beauty, perfection or innocence, and yet

¹ Interestingly, the central lines of this poem are almost identical with lines from a poem by Azra Abbas which is not included in the anthology. Compare Zeeshan Sahil: "*vo mujhē likhṛē hū`ē dekṛā hai / ūpar sē ničē kī ṛaraf / dāyēñ sē bāyēñ kī jāñib...*" and Azra Abbas: "*main lā`in kbēñctī hūñ / pahle dāyēñ sē bāyēñ / ek dō tīn buhat sī / phir unhēñ ūpar sē ničē kāṛtī jāti hūñ...*" from the poem "*Main Kabāñ Hūñ*" (Where Am I?). Despite the formal similarity each passage appears in a completely different context. In Azra Abbas's case, the lines finally fail to form a poem, turning into a net instead.

we can't help feeling that there is more to it. The last of Sahil's poems appearing here, "To the International Olympic Committee" (*Inṭarnaishnal Olampik Kamiṭī Kē Nām*, pp. 199–202), is full of bitter reproach and self-accusation. It paints an image of people engaged in trampling each other down, grasping at each other's necks, and burning the doves of peace. To me this is the harshest poem appearing in the anthology.

Tanveer Anjum's first two poems in the volume are very intimate, lyrical pieces, couched in images of forests and flowers. Love and loss are central themes in all of the poems by her which are presented here. The tone is predominantly personal, occasionally opening up for a broader perspective, and the diction is completely different from the diction of Azra Abbas and Sara Shagufta. Asif Farrukhi should be given credit for including these poems even though the author, in his words, is "a somewhat forgotten figure" (p. xviii).

Saiduddin's poems, which come at the end of the anthology, are among the most mystifying in the volume. Some of them are parable-like stories, drawing heavily on well-known images and metaphors but nevertheless occasionally finding startling new ways to express common aphorisms. In "Poem" (*Naẓm*, pp. 239–40) the lyrical persona dreams of expanding his horizons only to find his legs cut off when he wakes up, thus demonstrating the consequence of violating the rule to "Cut one's coat according to one's cloth" (the German saying "*Sich nach der Decke strecken*" is closer to the original Urdu). One of the most striking poems of the whole collection is "Ants" (*Ānṭiyān*, pp. 241–4). It conjures up a horrid image of decay in a completely new, unexpected fashion. The last poem of the book (*Nayā Fraim*, pp. 246–8) was befittingly renamed "The Last Page" by the translator. Farrukhi thinks that Saiduddin's best qualities are brought out in this poem and therefore regards it as "a fitting conclusion to the work of the poets gathered here" (p. xix).

In looking at the individual poets my only intention has been to give you a rough idea of the thematic and stylistic range of the poets and poems assembled in *An Evening of Caged Beasts*. It is impossible to paraphrase poetry in prose, so readers have to page through the book themselves to find out which poems make sense to them, which poems touch them, and which do not.

The translations in the anthology follow the original faithfully, producing, in almost all cases, powerful English versions (to the extent that a non-native speaker may judge). There are only a few instances where the translations, to my mind, do not exactly match or grasp the original

Urdu. Thus, instead of “Your feet / are encircled by those shoe-straps / through which you walk on our earth” (p. 41), the Urdu “*tumbārē pair / un jūtōn kē tasmōn sē ghīrē haiñ / jin sē tum hamārī zamīn par čaltī hō*” (p. 42) could be translated “...encircled by the straps of the shoes / in which you walk on our earth.” For “*jis kā kō’ī intizār na kar rahā hō / usē nahīñ judā karnā čahiyē / khūn-ālūda pā’ōñ sē / ēk pūrā safar*” (p. 52) the translation is “The one for whom / no one is waiting / should not separate / a bloodied foot / from a whole journey” (p. 51). Here I would suggest “...should not separate / a whole journey / from his bloodied foot.” In Sara Shagufta’s “*Ādhā Kamrā*” the line “*zar kī amān pā’ūñ tō batā’ūñ*” (p. 142), which is a somewhat cynical distortion of the phrase commonly found in traditional tales “*jān kī amān pā’ūñ tō batā’ūñ*” (If my life is granted I will say/tell), has been translated as “If God would permit me, I would tell” (p. 141). This translation completely misses the play on words. An English rendering closer to the original would be “If my wealth be granted....” The sentence “*ṭūṭē hō!*” (p. 146) in Shagufta’s “*Kaisē Ṭabaltā Hai Čand*” (“Lines from a Poem”) has been translated as “Be Broken!” (p. 145). Does it not mean “You are broken!?” And in her “*Shāyad Miṭṭī Mujhē Phir Pukārē*” (“Perhaps the Dust Might Call Me Again”) “make them into a face,” (p. 161) is the meaning given for “*tērē pās kō’ī čehra nahīñ*” (p. 162), which is literally “you have no face.” The deviation from the original does not make any sense to me here, but then perhaps I am just missing the point. At other places, certain words or lines which seem unnecessary are added in the translation. But such instances are very few compared to the bulk of successful translations assembled in the volume.

The book is beautiful to look at, with a pleasant layout, fine, unobtrusive graphics in the margins of each page, and very few printing errors. In one instance the titles of two poems have been transposed (Azra Abbas’s “Another Life” and “A Life Divided Into Pieces,” pp. 70–1 and 73–4). One critical remark I do want to make concerns the transition from one poet to the next. This is discernible only from the changed name in the title line of the page. Had an extra page bearing the respective poet’s name been inserted, or any similar arrangement, it would have made orientation easier for the reader. The table of contents is also somewhat difficult to find. But apart from these minor problems, reading the book is an aesthetic pleasure in every regard. □