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Beyond

We Sinful Women

Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry
Translated and Edited by Rukhsana Ahmad



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INTRODUCTION

For a long time Urdu poetry has been dominated by male figures whose reputations, established and confirmed by male critics, remain colossal in comparison with those of the women poets. Many of the poets represented in this volume are established and well known in Pakistan, but the literary establishment always implies that women poets are a special case: they achieve publication and, sometimes, celebrity, because they are women rather than because they are poets. This is essentially not unlike the patronising recognition which is awarded to women's and black writers' achievements in the West. They are easily marginalised by the implication that the interest in the work derives from its rarity rather than from any intrinsic qualities the work itself might possess. The source of the prejudice in both cases is exactly the same: the conservatism of literary establishments and their stranglehold on aesthetic values, their tendency to dismiss work to which they cannot themselves relate and their inability to empathise with work that derives directly from women's experiences.

In a male-dominated society devoted to the past, it is not surprising that the most popular women poets would be those who conform to both socio-cultural and literary traditions. Yet the women poets who attracted my interest, and whose work I have found the most exciting, represent brave departures from that literary tradition.

Traditional Urdu Poetry

Urdu is one of the relatively young languages from the subcontinent. It grew as a *lingua franca* for the troops in India, soon after the Muslim invasions of the subcontinent,

between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. As a hybrid deriving from quite different languages: Persian, Arabic and the native North Indian dialects, Urdu combined contrasting qualities and offered enormous flexibility. But it remained somewhat derided and did not acquire a literature until much later. Persian, the language of the courts, used for formal communications and for literary expression, was the language of the élite. Classical Persian literature exercised tremendous influence on Urdu poetry when it began to develop, around the seventeenth century, an influence that remained strong until quite recently.

Curiously enough, Urdu poetry has a stronger tradition behind it than Urdu prose. It flourished in cities like Delhi, Lucknow and Hyderabad, rapidly attaining its zenith in Mughal times under the patronage of rich Muslim rulers who often employed poets. In return, poets were expected to pay homage to their patrons and to deliver poems to mark important occasions. The most highly regarded and popular Urdu poet, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, lived in the shadows of the dying Mughal court of Bahadur Shah Zafar in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was, overwhelmingly, a man's world. The images of women that Urdu poetry offered were not unlike those glimpsed in Elizabethan sonnets: the love that it celebrated was, likewise, often unrequited. A feckless beloved, endowed with heavenly beauty, reigned: fair of face, doe-eyed, dark-haired, tall and willowy, a woman who vacillated from indifference, shyness and modesty to wanton wilfulness and cruelty. For her the poet was willing to die. It was a stylised and charming tradition but it was also hidebound in its strictures, formalism and usage.

Though there had been some mild expressions of social consciousness and comment in the nineteenth century, Urdu poetry was, primarily, romantic and idealised. It was the poet Iqbal, in the 1930s, who really established political

themes as valid subject matter. In the forties, the Progressive Writers' Association forged ahead and revived Urdu literature with the energy of the freedom movement that was vibrating through India. Urdu fiction triumphed in the work of successful but controversial writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai, one of the major women writers from the subcontinent. A collection of short stories, *Angaarey*, was banned by the British because of fears that it might cause unrest. The work of Ali Sardar Jafri, Mukhdoom, Meeraji and, later, N M Rashid and Faiz Ahmad Faiz added to the depth and richness of which the language was capable, laying the foundations of contemporary Urdu literature. However, with the exception of Meeraji and N M Rashid, most of the new generation of poets challenged content rather than the established forms.

The *ghazal*, which is still the most popular conventional form, can be set to music. It requires an ornamental style of writing and has a definable register for this purpose. In common with the sonnet it has a structured rhyme scheme and carefully controlled rhythm. Traditionally, it begins with a rhymed couplet. Each following couplet introduces a new idea linked to the central theme largely by the rhyme established at the outset. The closing couplet is also rhymed and may introduce the name of the poet. Conceits and exaggeration come naturally to the *ghazal* writer.

The bulk of published Urdu poetry still tends to be love poetry bound in the old idioms and conceits. It is not surprising, then, that when women wanted to use the medium to convey real, contemporary issues they had to abandon the more conventional forms, with their traditional images of women, and had to look at the possibilities of extending the language. Poems like 'Censorship', 'Section 144', 'Search Warrant' and 'Twelfth of February, 1983' are not only deliberately political, they are also consciously averse to the stilted, formal diction popular with earlier

Urdu poets. Poems like 'Virgin', 'She Is a Woman Impure', 'Who Am I?' 'Woman and Salt' and 'Dialogue with an Incomplete Man' not only refuse to conform to the notion of the ideal woman, they set out to defy it and to claim a new identity.

Fahmida Riaz has given the most thought to the issue of language and its links with working people. She deliberately chooses words which are rustic and/or of Indic origin instead of their literary, Persianised equivalents, always preferred by earlier poets, which are, naturally, less accessible to the masses and tend to make poetry more élitist. The 'political' attempts to move Urdu in the direction of Persian and Arabic by the Pakistani government and to Sanskritise Hindi by the Indian government, have had the effect of drawing those two mutually intelligible languages and their users apart. There is, she claims, no need for language to reflect religious ancestry and connections in any way. She finds greater vitality in the language of peasants and working people as it is less remote from reality than classical Persian and is constantly sustained by it.

Kishwar Naheed, who began her literary career writing in traditional forms, confesses that, increasingly, she finds them restrictive for the expression of any radical thought. There is a loftiness of style, which is so ingrained into the *ghazal* form, that lines such as:

Let me dry my wet clothes in these courtyards . . .

or:

for every morning I am slaughtered at my office desk,
for telling lies . . .

would be hopelessly out of place in it. Perhaps the greatest challenge to Urdu critics and intellectuals was thrown by Sara Shagufta who violated all the conventions and norms in her poetry. Piling image upon image in a multicoloured

collage of words, she reflects meaning as if through a prism of deliberate obscurity and defiance. Her poems make no concessions to the sound values of words. She shuns metrical patterns, repetition, alliteration and smooth lyrical sounds, the devices commonly favoured by traditional Urdu poets, choosing to rely instead on clusters of images:

I wake up in the fire
echoing in the stone
Drowning. What trees will grow from the earth
Call my sorrows a child -
in my hands are broken toys . . .
and before my eyes a man
countless bodies beg me for eyes . . .

Deeply pained by the cruel indifference of a chauvinistic poet husband who was surrounded by 'critics/friends' ready to deride her work, she challenges their double standards and unfair dominance. Whilst describing her own struggle as an artist in the USA, Judy Chicago records in her book, *Through the Flower*:

There was no frame of reference in 1970 to understand a woman's struggle, to value it or to read and respond to the imagery that grew out of it . . . And even if the male world could acknowledge that struggle, could it even allow it to be considered 'important' art, as important as the art that grew out of men's lives? I could not be content with having my work seen as trivial, limited, or 'unimportant', if it dealt openly with my experiences as a woman.

I would argue that circumstances are not much better twenty years later. Chicago's experience typifies the obstacles still faced by women artists, writers and poets.

around the world. A recent publication from London, *Reviewing the Reviews* (Women in Publishing, 1987), reveals that of 53,000 titles reviewed annually by the *Times Literary Supplement* only 3,000 books (approximately) are by women. The self-appointed arbiters of taste and aesthetics are still men. They define the literary canons, build or wreck reputations, and, by largely ignoring women's writing, marginalise it. Sometimes the pain and suffering which that causes inflicts a fatal wound on a sensitive spirit. Sylvia Plath's experience in England in 1963 finds an echo in the suicidal death of Sara Shagufta in Karachi in 1984.

The Selection

This selection is meant to challenge some of those judgments. I believe that the most innovative, the most radical and the most interesting Urdu poetry of our times is being produced by women and not by male poets. Unless women begin to assume and assert their role as critics, there is a danger that this fact may remain obscure and unnoticed.

I have tried to bring the contemporary strain in Urdu poetry by women into this selection and to put across the strength of feminist feeling and conviction that rewarded my search. I decided early on that I would select poems which had a content of feminist struggle or political awareness. I knew that this might not always yield the best of a poet's work and that I would have to exclude Parveen Shakir and Ada Jaafri, two well-known and highly regarded women poets. Both women have chosen to confine themselves to poetry which is apolitical, sentimental and conformist. Parveen Shakir, who is younger and has also hosted a popular television series on poetry, has explored themes such as physical love in her poetry, but the acceptance of sexist values and the absence of a social

context makes her writing distinctively un-feminist. Ada Jaafri's work is even more traditional than Shakir's.

My intention was to find the modern and the dynamic in women's Urdu poetry which would establish its relevance for the nineties. I reasoned that only those poets deserved to be included who had contributed something towards extending the frontiers of form and thought; those who had some original insights to offer, who represented that strand of the progressive tradition in Urdu poetry which had so powerfully contributed to the freedom movement in the early forties - a strand with a strong commitment to political action.

I was not seeking gems of individual value but a body of work that represented the mood of a generation of women in conflict with tradition and, to some extent, religion, as interpreted by men and expressed in Fundamentalist Islam. I found the courage and spirit within individual voices of protest impressive. Their rebellion, their self-conscious links with other artists, activists and writers involved in the movement, their need to challenge traditional forms, their interest in what women were writing in other languages across the world, were all aspects which I wanted to represent.

The term feminism is vague, elusive, and largely relative. As someone living in the West, who is constantly faced with the challenge of resolving the tensions between two quite diverse cultures, I am aware that it is a term that can straddle widely divergent attitudes. I have used the term here in its broadest sense: as an awareness of the disadvantages and constraints faced by women in a traditional society and a recognition of their need or the desire for freedom and change.

The most problematic for this definition might be the poems by Zehra Nigah. Is 'Compromise' a feminist or a feminine poem? There is a note of wistfulness, a knowledge

of having been short-changed, a certain sad dissatisfaction which, with its understanding of the inevitable weaving together of the social and the personal in women's lives, raises it above the level of the purely personal. In its honest acceptance of defeat which was and is the lot of the traditional, conformist woman, it still manages to attain a certain dignity and poignancy. Similarly, 'My Crime: A Promise' expresses the sense of personal loss and suffering in a world where the individual is secondary. Fortunately, controversial choices like that are fewer in the collection in comparison with work that is overtly political and more uncompromisingly feminist. By and large the collection contains work that addressed itself directly or indirectly to the reactionary forces in Pakistan which were threatening to undermine women's denuded position even further.

There were at least three important reasons behind my decision to work on this collection. I wanted to highlight the work of women poets in Pakistan as a tribute to its innovative nature and intrinsic value. Secondly, I wanted to chart and project the role of these poets in the women's movement that was gathering momentum in the country, so as to dispel the assumption that women in the developing world are passive, voiceless and hopelessly conformist. Finally, for myself, I needed to restore my links with a part of my heritage that I had been in danger of losing. In doing so, I restore those links for a whole generation of women in the diaspora who need the translation to help them find their way through the original. This work gave me enormous strength at a time when I felt bleak about the status of women in Pakistan.

The Socio-political Context

The military regime led by General Zia-ul-Haque is not

solely responsible for the low status of women in that country, nor has his death brought it to an end. It is the result of centuries of subjugation of women in the sub-continent. His regime clearly decided to use the women's issue to control society in a much more repressive grip.

Nawal El Saadawi's definition of Fundamentalism is certainly apt in the case of Pakistan. It is a world phenomenon which:

... operates under different religious slogans, but is a political movement using God to justify injustices and discriminate between people, nations, classes, races, sexes, colours and creeds . . .¹

General Zia-ul-Haque, who had seized power in a military coup from Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in July 1977, had promised elections within ninety days. Less than two years later, Bhutto had been hanged, elections cancelled and political activity banned. During this time, a programme for Islamisation was carefully formulated and honed, then launched to gain support from right-wing elements for an otherwise unpopular regime which strongly promoted capital and free enterprise.

Broadly, the underlying objectives of the programme were to curtail democracy and establish a theocratic state which would be extremely difficult to dislodge. It was assumed by him, as it still is, by the IJI² (the coalition of parties led by Nawaz Sharif, now in power in Pakistan), that Islamisation had the potential for cementing a crumbling national identity. The Soviet invasion could not have been timed better to suit the political exigencies of the time, bringing in, as it did, substantial US aid and muffling international censure at a critical point. Thus the people of Pakistan were left isolated to suffer the excesses of this tyrannical process for eleven damaging years.

Ironically, the process itself had been begun in Bhutto's reign with a few laws, such as the Prohibition of Alcohol, the declaration of Friday as the holiday in the working week and the closure of Western-style discotheques. These laws were enacted by Bhutto as concessions to the right-wing opposition in a last bid to survive. These became insignificant, in hindsight, as personal freedoms were eroded by successive laws enforced in the name of Islam by General Zia.

The Islamic Ideology Council had been in place for some time with a brief to scrutinise existing laws which might be in contravention of Shariat (Muslim) laws. Women's groups were constantly being reassured by General Zia that the Family Laws Ordinance (1961) would not be repealed. This was a precious piece of legislation won by women in Ayub Khan's time which obtained limited protection from bigamy and some rights within marriage. In Zia's time it seemed vulnerable. In the event, its efficacy was reduced and women were left fighting legislation which was much more retrogressive and direct in its assault on their basic rights.

A nationwide media campaign entitled *Chadur aur Chardiwari* (the veil and four walls) was mounted to enforce the seclusion of women with *Nawaa-i-Waqt*, a leading Urdu daily, at its head. The government issued directives concerning the wearing of *chadurs* by television presenters and female government employees. This was followed by an 'anti-pornography' campaign which reduced the participation of women in television and entertainment. The Muslim parties knew that General Zia needed their support to continue in power and made full use of the collusion.

A serious attempt was made to deny educational opportunities to girls and young women. The minimum age for marriage, raised by the Family Laws Ordinance to eighteen years, was debated in an attempt to bring it, supposedly, into accordance with Islamic law. This defines

the onset of puberty as a sign of maturity in girls and permits consummation of marriage at that age. Fortunately, pressure from the World Bank, which saw the implications of such a law for population increase, prevented this from being instituted.³

A campaign to relegate women to segregated universities also failed partly because of financial implications, partly through the realisation that women vastly outnumbered male students in Karachi University, partly owing to pressure from the women's groups who rightly saw this as a dangerous reduction of opportunities for women.

Whilst laws curtailing political activity and the promotion of the idea that only 'good Muslims' were eligible for testimony and public office affected all citizens, particularly the minorities in Pakistan, it gradually became apparent that women would be the subject of a major revival of oppressive laws.

The first real inkling of the seriousness of the problem came with the promulgation of the Hudood Ordinances on 10 February, 1979. These dealt with: theft, drunkenness, *Qazf* (bearing false witness) and, finally, *zina*, which included rape and adultery. The word *hadd* literally means boundary or limit and the term *hadd* implies a maximum penalty fixed by the Sharia for a particular offence.

Federal Shariat courts had been set up to speed up the process of Islamisation. These were special benches of each of the four High Courts and an appellate Shariat Bench at the Supreme Court.⁴ They effectively implemented changes which the Islamic Ideology Council had previously been able only to recommend in an advisory role. Not only did the Shariat courts have the power to award or review the punishments designated by the Hudood Ordinances, they also had the power to review any law which anyone wishing to challenge 'un-Islamic' legislation could invoke through a petition.

The *hadd* for theft – amputation of the right hand for a first offence, and the left foot for a second one (if there were no extenuating circumstances) – had shocked most Pakistanis. The lower sessions court judges frequently made blundering judgments based on Hudood laws, provoking public outrage and women's fury. This left the higher Shariat benches to mop up the mess. Repeatedly, sentences were awarded by the lower courts only to be reversed by a higher court in recognition of public disgust. For the government it was easiest to use flogging (awarded for drunkenness, public order offences and other petty crimes) as a powerful political weapon to create an atmosphere of fear and to silence dissent.

The worst laws affecting the status of women were yet to come. Not everyone understood the full implications of the Hudood Ordinance, covering *zina*, when it was first announced. The offence of *zina* (adultery) by a married person carried the extreme penalty of death, and the *hadd* penalty of death by stoning. For an unmarried person the penalty was up to a hundred lashes. In practice, the law failed to distinguish clearly enough between fornication, adultery and rape. Rape, '*zina bil Jabr*', required the same testimony as adultery, that is, four adult male Muslims of good repute who testify to have seen the act of penetration. This made prosecution of rape impossible under this law. (However, ordinary civil law continued to be applied to rape cases and charges could be brought against offenders, and indeed were, during the Zia years.) But an attempt was made in some of the lower courts to use this piece of legislation against women, to subvert the due process of law and punish the victim. Specially at risk were unmarried women who became pregnant and who could, therefore, be held guilty of unlawful intercourse. This led to some absurd sentences and was subject to misuse by the police and civil

authorities against working-class women who were less able to protect their own interests.

It was not until the autumn of 1982 when a couple, Fehmida and Allah Bux, were awarded the *hadd* punishment of death by stoning that women were finally jolted into action. Shirkat Gah, a women's pressure group based in Karachi, began the process by calling a meeting of all women's groups and inviting them to act to protect women's rights. Women's Action Forum was launched with an emphasis on action; two months later the Lahore chapter was set up and Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Peshawar soon followed suit. Women in the Forum were drawn from a range of organisations. In its infancy, the movement suffered from bitter wrangling and power struggles but nevertheless gathered momentum. WAF's great achievement was to obtain the endorsement of APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association), the oldest, broad-based, centrist women's organisation in Pakistan. Many APWA members had fought in the freedom movement alongside men and had expected equal rights in the new country. The realisation that even existing freedoms were now to be taken away instead of being extended, shocked them. Begum Raana Liaquat Ali, the Chair of APWA, gave the resistance her blessing, which was important and valuable. WAF had decided to appeal on behalf of Fehmida and Allah Bux but Khalid Ishaq, a leading expert in Islamic Jurisprudence, took on the case and succeeded in obtaining a dismissal.

Two years later, women's groups in Lahore, active and vigilant, were more readily mobilised when the case of Safia Bibi, a near-blind working-class woman, drew public attention. She had been raped by a landlord and his son in whose home she was employed as a domestic servant. Her father had registered a rape case against them after the birth of her illegitimate baby, who died. The sessions judge had taken it upon himself to award her punishment under

the Zina Ordinance: fifteen lashes, three years of imprisonment and a fine of Rs.1000 (in his view, a mild sentence) whilst finding her rapists not guilty owing to lack of evidence, under the same law. Women, shocked and horrified, managed to co-ordinate, a sophisticated media campaign, as well as a defence which led the government into considerable embarrassment at an international level, and a prompt dismissal of the case by the Federal Shariat High Court followed.

Women now recognised clearly that:

As the law stands it protects rapists, prevents women from testifying and confuses the issue of rape with adultery.⁵

Their next step was to challenge the legislation in a court of law, which they did. A team of eminent lawyers including Rashida Patel⁶ and Khalid Ishaq represented them, but, by the time the case was heard (1985) by the Federal Shariat Court, the Eighth Amendment had rendered it null and void.

Seven years later, the martial law had changed its strategy, attained a semi-legal status through elections contested on a non-party basis and was making far-reaching changes in the laws through the so-called 'elected representatives'. The free world media image of General Zia was no longer that of a villain, but that of a champion of the Afghan Mujahideen struggling for liberation from their Soviet invaders.

Stoning had never been instituted or practised in Pakistan before 1979, nor has it been allowed to happen since. There are no verifiable records of its practice amongst Muslims since early times, even in Saudi Arabia. The idea is repugnant to many Pakistanis, both men and women, and sentences have in the past been revoked, as a response to

campaigns. But the laws remain on the statute books and can be used to harass ordinary people.

Even now casework is undertaken by women's groups who need to support those members of the public, mostly women who are still vulnerable and may find themselves trapped in the iniquitous Hudood laws through personal enmities or official malice. Zehra Nigah's poem 'Hudood Ordinance' refers to such an innocent victim.

Najma Sadeque's hard work drew public attention to several instances of extreme cruelty and injustice against women during the Zia years. A founder member of Karachi WAF and a successful journalist, she makes perceptive comments about the nature of oppression against women in an article entitled 'The Importance of Stoning a Woman', published in a leading Pakistani daily newspaper, *Dawn* (Karachi), in 1987:

It is power that is imposed against public will that has to turn intimidatory and ugly to enforce itself. The act of stoning a woman to death would be a manifestation of that power sanctioned to give fangs to functionary power at the social level... the stoning of a woman is a means of declaring (as do all other arbitrary sentences, ordinances and directives) as to who calls the shots, driving the message home with anticipated paralysing effect.

As the country veered further towards Saudi influence, the Ahmediya Muslims were excommunicated and hounded, being declared non-Muslims. Clearly then, Najma Sadeque's assessment is valid. Through these laws force against women was being used to control the rest of society more effectively. Two poems in this collection deal directly with stoning: Fahmida Riaz's 'Stoning' (written before the promulgation of the law) and Neelma Sarwar's 'I Wish That Day of Judgment Would Come'. Neelma Sarwar deals with

public flogging in 'To the First Man to Be Awarded Lashes'.

Women were constantly waging battles against all these retrogressive changes but the issue which galvanised them into action was the Law of Evidence. This was designed to curtail the civic rights and stature of women as individuals by declaring the testimony of one woman as insufficient evidence unless supported by another woman. In effect it valued the testimony of one woman as worth half that of a man. The absurdity of this law and fears that it might be a step towards disenfranchising them brought women out on a march in Lahore on 12 February 1982, led by professional women. It was, at best, a group of 200 or so but police reacted with fierce and disproportionate violence; tear gas, baton charges and arrests followed. Saeeda Gazdar's 'Twelfth of February, 1983' is based on this episode of the struggle.

The slant of the laws against women began to have a subtle but clearly visible effect on society. There were obvious changes, for example, in the way women were dressing and behaving. Young couples were stopped and harassed if the police thought that they might be courting. Bigamy, illegal and socially taboo since the Family Laws Ordinance (except by permission of the first wife), came back in through the back door as the local Union Councils who implemented the law disappeared and were not replaced. Kishwar Naheed makes reference to permission papers in her poem 'Section 144' which bemoans the times.

As time went on, the Islamisation campaign had the effect of escalating violence against women. The Women's Action Forum recorded and drew attention to the rising statistics of crimes, brutality and mistreatment of women. Their activism prevented some of these atavistic laws from being instituted. For example, the Law of Evidence, fought by women so heroically in its draft form, had to change in its final form. It was decided that it would only be applied to

documented agreements concerning financial dealings and commercial contracts and not be used as a blanket law covering all situations involving women's testimony.

Nevertheless, the damage had been done. Cultural events became men-only affairs with music, singing and dancing virtually disappearing from the stages. Television became a powerful weapon of religious propaganda, blaring out the virtues of prayer and asceticism whilst the rich got richer and the poor groaned under a spiralling rate of inflation. Posters drove home messages of fear of God and death in a time-bound material world. Artists sold their paint brushes for calligraphy pens. Only a handful of women artists continued to paint with an awareness of the political context and a fiercely heightened sense of the oppression of women. Amongst them were Salima Hashmi and Naazish Ataullah, both of whom have, appropriately, worked on cover designs for Kishwar Naheed's books.

During her brief tenure as Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto did not change or challenge any of the legislation affecting women; nor did she seem able to contest the indirect domination or social control by men which was expressed in the changed fashions and the donning of veils. She fought the election sporting a veil herself, something she had never done before, and has not been able to shed it since. She is careful never to be seen in Western garments and, unlike her younger self, dresses in the prescribed Islamic manner. Her successor, Nawaz Sharif, was brought to power through a coalition which includes the religious parties, and so would be expected to follow, at least ostensibly, the trend towards Islamisation.

The recent enactment of the Shariat Bill demonstrates a shrewd compromise which has left both fundamentalist extremists and liberals unhappy, but which has resolved a long-standing problem. It has transformed the original Bill - which would have made Parliament redundant and

considerably weakened the executive since it was designed to replace the constitution of Pakistan with Shariat laws – into a new, benign version which leaves legislative power firmly in the hands of the National Assembly and makes all revisions in the direction of Islamisation subject to the will of the Assembly. The Islamic parties did not do well at the polls and the likelihood of retrogressive changes now seems smaller, though it cannot be overruled. Women's groups have maintained a judicious silence. A climate has nevertheless been created which makes progressive changes in the laws affecting women less likely.

Poetry in Urdu is not the exclusive property of the cultural élite. Poetry readings, or *mushai'ras*, are an established and popular convention for Urdu speakers and attract many people who may not otherwise view themselves as 'literary' or who may not be in the habit of buying books. As some of this poetry is also set to music and sung, its use for political influence cannot be underestimated. Poets can, therefore, become targets for political persecution, as indeed Riaz and Naheed were. Iqbal had made direct political use of his poetry during the struggle for freedom by reciting at political rallies. Pakistani women are now using this convention too, consciously and effectively.

Some of the poets in the collection have strong links with the women's movement; they have read, recited and published work for women's groups to mark occasions such as International Women's Day and at rallies. There were also campaign poems, jingles and anthems, poetry of a more accessible style, published in newsletters or pamphlets which have not been included here. In some ways Saeeda Gazdar's poem, 'Twelfth of February, 1983' which has its value as social history, belongs to this category.

This collection thus represents a new wave of self-aware and highly politicised women poets who understand the dimensions of the battle on their hands and whose work is

concerned with women's issues and informed with careful, sensitive thought. These women may be in a small minority but it is one which is vocal. Many of them have consciously undertaken formal studies of women's deprivation and political issues in Pakistan. They sustain, respect and validate each other's work, realising that there is a large block of support, silent and invisible though it may be. This volume serves as a tribute to their work and to the women's movement in Pakistan.

A Word About the Translation

At a literary event honouring him in London, the Soviet poet Rasul Gamzatov, who writes in a 'minor' language from the Ukraine and speaks no English himself, described receiving poetry in translation as an experience comparable to looking at the wrong side of a carpet. It is a harsh judgment but it contains an element of truth. There is no doubt a serious loss of some of the qualities essential to poetry in the best of translations for which there is no easy substitute. Yet, in a much smaller and still much-divided world, translations are an invaluable tool for deepening understanding, appreciation and tolerance for cultures that may be at variance with each other.

The greater the differences in the cultural mores of two societies the harder it is for a translator to do justice to the original. Again, the finer the poem, the richer it is in terms of suggestions, references, emotional innuendos and subtleties and the harder it becomes to translate it well.

My technique has been to rely heavily on the imagery and to stay as loyal to that as possible. Wherever the images are free of special cultural referents the reader would have as close an experience of the poem as is possible without knowing the language; however, often there is a complex

overlay of a culturally defined context and only a transfer of images is not enough. There are other clues to the meaning which I have used in such poems. I have not restricted myself to abiding by the word order in the original since Urdu is a 'free word order' language and that often translates into extremely awkward constructions in English. I have attempted a sense of rhyme and rhythm but not as a religious rite for every poem, only as a means of conveying its essential quality in the original. A poem such as Zehra Nigah's 'The Moonflower Tree' would suffer too much if reduced to free verse. I have tried to evolve some kind of a rhyming pattern for *ghazals* as I felt this is quite essential to their nature. It works better in some instances than it does in others but even if it conveys partially the wonderful satisfaction of a genre that is highly symmetrical, formal and richly melodious, it serves the purpose.

Unlike English, metrical patterns in Urdu depend on line lengths and lengths of syllables rather than on stresses. There is no preordained word order and punctuation is seldom used. I have introduced some punctuation where it is necessary.

I decided that I preferred footnotes along with the original Urdu words in some instances to mismatched, unsatisfactory English equivalents and feel that the explanation in each instance will justify my judgment to the reader. Some of the footnotes clarify a political or historical reference.

THE POETS

Kishwar Naheed

If there is a Pakistani feminist who poses a serious threat to men through her work, her lifestyle, her manner and

through ceaseless verbal challenge, it is Kishwar Naheed. She does this with a professional dedication which either endears or enrages, there are no half-measures. At forty-seven, widowed, mother of two grown sons, completely independent financially, she is above many strictures that other women in Pakistan would have to observe, those which remain she flouts with a relish.

She held a powerful position above her peers as the editor of a prestigious monthly, *Maah-i-Nau*, for several years, which meant that many of her male colleagues have had to put up with her cultivated stropiness however much they may have resented it. This government publication has acquired its reputation for editorial independence and literary quality over several years and through the hard work of several progressive editors. Whilst Kishwar was editor she was charged with various offences on thirty different occasions. One of these was a charge of obscenity brought against her after she published an abridged version of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She won the court battle and managed to have her grade as an officer restored which had been stripped as a punishment.

Kishwar has been no stranger to controversy. At twenty she married Yusuf Kamraan, a classmate and fellow poet (who was later to become a television celebrity), against the wishes of her family, dropped out of her final year of Economics and went to work to support him through *his* final year. Their marriage remained unconventional but the relationship appears to be somewhat ambivalent, a far cry from the fairy-tale ending the youthful poets in love might have expected it to be. A strong streak of cynicism runs through the personal poetry of both poets in later years.

Kishwar is perhaps the most prolific poet of her generation. As her writing became more political, developing rapidly partly because of her determination to expand her

work and partly in response to the political climate in Pakistan which became increasingly repressive towards women after Bhutto's deposition, Kishwar's reputation grew. Her poetry thrived on the persecution she was subjected to as a civil servant. Her search for growth led her to a detailed study of progressive contemporary poets from several countries, many of whom she translated into Urdu in a volume which is often accused of having been put together too hastily.

Kishwar's free verse and style have been criticised for lack of polish, for 'shoddiness', but what is missing in terms of poetic craft is compensated for adequately by her enormous range, boundless energy and uninhibited, honest exploration of themes. Her poems range from traditional love poems written in the early years to those dealing with hysterectomy, male chauvinism, censorship, American intervention in Pakistan and a host of feminist issues.

To date, her work includes several volumes of poetry: *Lips that Speak*, *Unnamed Journey*, *Poems*, *Alleyways: the Sun: Doorways*, *Amidst Reproaches*, *Complete Poems* and *The Colour Pink within a Black Border*. Her prose work *Woman 'twixt Dreams and Dust* deals with Pakistani women's issues in depth: images of women in the media and textbooks, crimes against women, rape, abortion, women in agriculture, women and politics, the role of religion and the controversial family laws of Pakistan. She has also published *Come Back Africa*, the story of Laila Khalid, and *Women in the Mirror of Psychology*. Two collections of Kishwar Naheed's poems have been translated into English.

Fahmida Riaz

Fahmida Riaz, who graduated from Sindh University and married in 1965, has published several volumes of poetry.

During the Martial Law regime she was editor and publisher of the magazine, *Awaaz*. In all, fourteen court cases of sedition were filed against the magazine, one of which (under section 114 A) carried a death penalty. She escaped to India whilst on bail, with her husband and two children, where she lived for seven years. She worked as Poet-in-Residence at Jamia Millia, an Indian university, during this period.

She has translated Erich Fromme's *Fear of Freedom* and Sheikh Ayaz's poetry, from Sindhi into Urdu. Since the restoration of democracy she has returned to live in Pakistan and served as Director General of Pakistan's National Book Council in Islamabad when Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party was in power.

Her book, *The Body Lacerated*, caused tremendous controversy because of its uninhibited and vigorous exploration of female sexuality. A woman in traditional Urdu poetry is a concept, not a person . . . an ideal with rosy cheeks, shining black eyes concealed shyly under long, dark eyelashes and a shapely swaying body. Fahmida rejects that passive virginal model in favour of a living, throbbing, vocal and passionate reality.

Her greatest contribution to literature is her recognition of the role of language in society. She has some interesting insights to offer, particularly with regard to the history of the Urdu language. She is committed to modifying the choice of diction which is current and accepted in established circles of Urdu poetry. She brings to her poetry her conviction that literary Urdu, too closely associated with the Persianised Imperial Court, had lost its nutritive sources as a living language of the people, by losing touch with its roots. Since the sustenance, relevance and contemporaneity of a language must derive from its living usage, not from books and papers, her argument is valid. Languages which cut off links with their grass-roots

communities have been known to become emaciated, and do, invariably, die. She herself struggles in her language to restore its links with the usage of peasants and workers.

Riaz has moved away from the *ghazal* form but her poems resonate with music and her success as a lyricist is widely acknowledged. She has published *My Crime Is Proven, Will You Not See the Full Moon?*, *Sun, Stones that Speak* and *I Am a Statue of Clay*.

Sara Shagufta

The late Sara Shagufta, who committed suicide tragically young after tremendous personal suffering, rejected the role models and literary images of women more completely than any other poet represented in this collection. She defies the poetic traditions of Urdu, inverting, bending, subverting, challenging all the rules. Her work is rich in terms of imagery, originality and sheer poetic energy. Perhaps the tragic depths of her experience are best represented in her own words. 'The Last Word' is the title of a biographical letter appended to her only collection of poems, *Eyes*. It describes very baldly some traumatic moments in her life. I have translated a short excerpt:

When the pains got worse the landlady heard me screaming and left me at the hospital. 'I held five crackling notes and the pain in my hands.'

After some time a boy was born. It was bitterly cold and there was not even a towel to wrap the child.

The doctor placed the baby beside me on the stretcher.

For five minutes the baby opened its eyes and then left to earn itself a coffin.

Since that day my body feels full of eyes.

Sister showed me into the ward. I told her I want to go home because at home no one knows where I am. She glared at me and said it may be dangerous for me to rush around, that I should stay in bed. But I could not rest after that.

I had a dead baby and five rupees.

'It is difficult for me to stay in hospital now. I haven't got the money for the fee. I'll fetch it. I won't run away. You can keep my dead baby as a surety.'

I had a temperature of 105 degrees. I got on to the bus and went home. My breasts were overflowing. I filled a glass with milk and kept it on the table. The poet and the other scribes returned. I said to the poet, 'I gave birth to a boy but he has died.'

He heard it casually and mentioned it to his critics.

There was silence in the room for two minutes.

The conversation resumed in the third minute.

What do you think of Freud?

What does Rimbaud say?

What has Saadi said?

Warris Shah was the greatest.

I used to hear these things every day but the words sounded clearer today.

As if all these great people had stopped in my blood for a little while. And as if Rimbaud and Freud were snatching my baby from my womb. That day Knowledge entered my home for the first time and was screaming with laughter in my blood. Look at the birth of my child!

Zehra Nigah

Zehra Nigah is a much-loved and highly respected poet in Pakistan, but although she has written for several years she

has published only one volume of poetry: *The First Star of Twilight*. This single volume spans three distinct periods in her writing and demonstrates her skills as an accomplished lyricist and a fine poet capable of both intensity and subtlety. The slimness of this volume speaks eloquently of the precedence she gave to domesticity over poetry: a heroic sacrifice but one that was evidently not without pain. Zehra Nigah's work is quite traditional, both in form and content. Her reputation owes much to her elegant phrasing and a highly cultivated style of presentation which enthralled audiences at poetry readings. The poems included here illustrate the pathos of her resignation. They acknowledge the power of the forces to which women must submit in sharp contrast with the energy and anger apparent in the work of the more political poets like Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz. They are also interesting in as much as they stay well within the bounds of 'protest' expected and permitted in women's writing from the subcontinent.

Zehra Nigah lives in London, where she occasionally appears at literary events.

Ishrat Aafreen

Ishrat Aafreen is the youngest and one of the lesser-known poets in the collection. She has worked as assistant editor for a monthly magazine, *Awaaz*. Her only volume of poems, *A Grove of Yellow Flowers*, is remarkable for a first offering. It has been awarded condescending approval in an introduction by Ali Sardar Jaafri.

She is the most literary of the poets in this collection, in terms of style; almost archaic in her observation of traditional norms, her use of language, and the most subtle in perception and argument. Perhaps on her shoulders the mantle of Faiz's tradition sits most comfortably. She herself

identifies strongly with the poet Iqbal. A poem paying tribute to him describes him as a tree growing inside her. Her concept of Ego perhaps derives from Iqbal's concept of the Self. As opposed to its somewhat negative meaning in English, Aafreen uses the Urdu equivalent of the word ego to represent the individual self engaged in defiant and courageous battle with society.

It is curiously satisfying to see this highly polished traditional style in the service of a philosophy that is individual and rebellious. Her *ghazals* in the collection perhaps best illustrate this point. Aafreen's recognition of the cruelty to which women are subject is unambiguous and strong and her use of traditional metaphors heightens this sense of oppression by clinching the mechanics of that oppression with unfaltering clarity. She identifies how that which is upheld as heroic, pure and virtuous womanhood actually destroys and consumes women.

Aafreen married soon after the publication of her first volume of poetry and left Pakistan briefly to live in India. She has not published since, as if to confirm the 'poison of all the traditions' she writes about.

Saeeda Gazdar

Saeeda Gazdar worked as editor of a literary magazine, *Pakistani Adab*, for three years. She has also worked as a research associate at the Goethe Institute. She has published a novel entitled *The Boatman's Wife* and a collection of short stories, *The Fire Never Bloomed into a Garden*. Several of her articles, stories and poems have been published in newspapers and she has written scripts for documentary films, a couple of which were shown internationally. She is publishing another novel and a further collection of short stories. She has written two volumes of poems, *Chains of*

Days and Nights and Gallows and Millstones.

She has fought for women's rights and freedom in Pakistan not only through her writing but also through direct political action.

Neelma Sarwar

Neelma Sarwar is a graduate in Journalism who is now serving as a Deputy Superintendent for the police force in Lahore. She has published one volume of poetry, *Tongues of Stone*.

Most of the poems in her collection are personal. It is, however, significant that a poet who is not particularly feminist in her attitudes should have chosen to write at least a few poems which deal with the phase of repression that the country was undergoing. It also demonstrates that the women's movement has begun to raise the level of both political awareness and comment in certain sections of society.

In her work as a police officer she would, of course, have been in direct contact with the recipients of the awful punishments the government was handing out. All four poems represented in this collection deal with the theme of guilt and punishment.

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NOTES

1. Nawal El Saadawi, *Fundamentalism on the Rise, Spare Rib* 202, June 1989.
2. IJI (Islami Jamhoori Itihad) is a working coalition of some Muslim League sections with Muslim parties, headed by Nawaz Sharif, a key opposition figure and chief minister of the Punjab, who was also governor of the Punjab in Gen Zia-ul-Haque's last years.
3. For a detailed discussion of this see: Lucy Carroll, *Nizam-I-Islam*, with special reference to the Position of Women in *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol xx, no 1.
4. *Introduction of Hudood Laws in Pakistan*, Pakistan Publications, Islamabad 1979.
5. Farida Shaheed and Khawar Mumtaz, *Women of Pakistan*. Zed Books, London 1987, p 101.
6. Rashida Patel: author of two important books, *Islamisation of Laws in Pakistan* Saad, Karachi 1986 and *Women and Law in Pakistan*, Faiza, Karachi, 1979.
7. *Dawn*, Karachi.