We Sinful Women

It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns
who don’t sell our lives
who don’t bow our heads
who don’t fold our hands together.

It is we sinful women
while those who sell the harvests of our bodies
become exalted
become distinguished
become the just princes of the material world.

It is we sinful women
who come out raising the banner of truth
up against barricades of lies on the highways
who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold
who find the tongues which could speak have been severed.

It is we sinful women.
Now, even if the night gives chase
these eyes shall not be put out.
For the wall which has been razed
don’t insist now on raising it again.
It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear
gowns
who don’t sell our bodies
who don’t bow our heads
who don’t fold our hands together.

KISHWAR NAHEED
Section 144*

We seek blindness
where the limits of discernment disappear
and we become merely a touch
Touch which is a mirror of apology and entreaty.
Here poverty and wealth shall remain
because we touch minds and render them valueless.
Trees wear leaves
but, lusting for union, Autumn buries them underground.

We seek deafness
where words and meanings are held captive
merely by the motion of moving lips.
Movement – if puppet strings move a trifle incorrectly
the entire show collapses.
This show will go on.
Don’t let your inner fears turn to an uncontrollable
tremor.

We wish to be mute
for those who clap do not use their voices
A voice that is independent is the cry of Mansur**
When it is suffocated it becomes Naasir***
But at least the mute can scream
Why is that so? How is that possible?

KISHWAR NAHEED

*A section of the law used to prohibit public assemblies.
**Mansur was executed for insisting: ‘I am God’ in a mystical trance.
***A civil servant punished for speaking out against the government.
A Palace of Wax

Before I ever married
my mother
used to have
nightmares.
Her fearful screams shook me
I would wake her, ask her
‘What happened?’
Blank-eyed she would stare at me.
She couldn’t remember her dreams.

One day a nightmare woke her
but she did not scream
She held me tight in silent fear
I asked her,
‘What happened?’
She opened her eyes and thanked the heavens
‘I dreamt that you were drowning,’
she said,
‘And I jumped into the river to save you.’

That night the lightning
killed our buffalo and my fiancé.

Then one night my mother slept
And I stayed up
Watching her open and shut her fist
She was trying to hold on to something
Failing, and willing herself to hold on again.

I woke her
But she refused to tell me her dream.

Since that day
I have not slept soundly.
I moved to the other courtyard.

Now I and my mother both scream through our nightmares

And if someone asks us
We just tell them
We can’t remember our dreams.

KISHWAR NAHEED
The Grass Is Really Like Me

The grass is also like me
it has to unfurl underfoot to fulfil itself
but what does its wetness manifest:
a scorching sense of shame
or the heat of emotion?

The grass is also like me
As soon as it can raise its head
the lawnmower,
obessed with flattening it into velvet,
mows it down again.
How you strive and endeavour
to level woman down too!
But neither the earth's nor woman's
desire to manifest life dies.
Take my advice: the idea of making a footpath was a
good one.
Those who cannot bear the scorching defeat of their
courage
are grafted on to the earth.
That's how they make way for the mighty
but they are merely straw not grass
- the grass is really like me.

KISHWAR NAHEED
Who Am I?

I am not that woman selling socks and shoes
I am the one you needed to bury alive
to feel fearless as the wind again
For you never knew
that stones can never suppress a voice.

I am the one you hid beneath
the weight of traditions
For you never knew
that light can never fear pitch darkness.

I am the one from whose lap you picked flowers
and then poured flames and thorns instead
For you never knew
that chains cannot hide the fragrance of flowers.

In the name of modesty
you bought and sold me
For you never knew
that Sohni* cannot die braving the river on a fragile
pot of clay.

*A famous Punjabi legend. Sohni would cross the River Chenab on a baked clay pot every night to meet her lover. This pot was substituted by her sister-in-law for an unbaked one, causing her to drown.
I am the one you gave away in marriage
So you could be rid of me
For you never knew
that a nation cannot emerge if the mind is enslaved.

For a long time you have profited by my shyness and modesty
Traded so well on my motherhood and fidelity,
Now the season for flowers to bloom in our laps and minds is here.

Semi-naked on the posters –
I am not that woman – selling socks and shoes.

KISHWAR NAHEED
Nightmare

The goat awaits slaughter
and I wait for the morning
for every morning I am slaughtered at my office desk
for telling lies.
This is my price.

Like fresh graves,
faces smoothly caked with powder
come to meet me
In the graveyard of minds only such adornments seem appropriate.

I and my country were born together
but we both lost our vision in our childhood.
I have not seen bread.
In my imagination I picture it and eat it.
A number of my generation dreams only of bread.

In my country women look at the crescent moon and pray
And shelve all of their prayers for the first day
of the next moon.
Even after they have stamped permits for a second marriage with their own thumbs
they pray when they see the first moon of the month.
Perhaps, to attain a better afterlife for liars like us.
KISHWAR NAHEED

The one who’s “our” had everything wrong.

Now even the ironmonger, who makes the sword,
it is he who writes victory.

We sing praises of our warlike courage.

A sword taller than ourselves we claim as our inheritance.

Those who live in rusty times amongst rusty tongues, decorating our tongues with our ancestral colours.

Flies assail us.

A sword taller than ourselves we claim as our inheritance.

Those who live in rusty times amongst rusty tongues, decorating our tongues with our ancestral colours.

The one who’s “our” had everything wrong.

Now even the ironmonger, who makes the sword,
it is he who writes victory.
Censorship

In those times when the camera could not freeze tyranny for ever
only until those times
should you have written
that history
which describes tyranny as valour.

Today, gazing at scenes
transferred on celluloid,
one can gauge
what the scene is like
and the sound
when trees are uprooted from the hillsides.

Whether you are happy or sad
you must breathe
Whether your eyes are open or closed
the scene, its imprint on the mind,
does not change.

The tree that stands in the river
always remains wooden
cannot become a crocodile.

For a long time now,
we have stood
on the rooftops of stories
believing this city is ours
The earth beneath the foundations has sunk
but even now we stand
on the rooftops of stories
assuming life to be
the insipid afternoon’s wasted alleyways
with their shattered bricks
and gaping fissures.

KISHWAR NAHEED
Punish me
for I have written the significance of the dream
in my own blood
written a book ridden with an obsession
Punish me
for I have spent my life sanctifying the dream of the
future
spent it enduring the tribulations of the night
Punish me
for I have imparted knowledge and the skills of the
sword to the murderer
and demonstrated the power of the pen to the mind
Punish me
for I have been the challenger of the crucifix of hatred
I'm the glow of torches which burn against the wind
Punish me
for I have freed womanhood from the insanity of the
deluded night
Punish me
for if I live you might lose face
Punish me
for if my sons raise their hands you will meet your end
If only one sword unsheaths itself to speak you will
meet your end
Punish me
for I love the new life with every breath
I shall live my life and shall doubly live beyond my life
Punish me for then the sentence of your punishment
will end.

KISHWAR NAHEED
Anticlockwise

Even if my eyes become the soles of your feet
even so, the fear will not leave you
that though I cannot see
I can feel bodies and sentences
like a fragrance.

Even if, for my own safety,
I rub my nose in the dirt till it becomes invisible
even so, this fear will not leave you
that though I cannot smell
I can still say something.

Even if my lips, singing praises of your godliness
become dry and soulless
even so, this fear will not leave you
that though I cannot speak
I can still walk.

Even after you have tied the chains of domesticity,
shame and modesty around my feet
even after you have paralysed me
this fear will not leave you
that even though I cannot walk
I can still think.
Your fear
of my being free, being alive
and able to think
might lead you, who knows, into what travails.

KISHWAR NAHEED
To the Masters of Countries with a Cold Climate

My country is torrid
maybe that is why my hands feel warm
My country is torrid
maybe that is why my feet burn
My country is torrid
maybe that is why there are boils on my body
My country is torrid
maybe that is why the roof of my house melted and caved in.

My country is torrid
maybe that is why my children are kept thirsty
My country is torrid
maybe that is why I am kept unclothed.

My country is torrid
maybe that is why one neither knows of clouds which bring rainfall
nor of floods that destroy.
And to wreck my harvests, sometimes moneylenders,
sometimes wild beasts, sometimes calamities
and sometimes self-styled masters arrive.

Don’t teach me to hate my torrid country
Let me dry my wet clothes in these courtyards
let me plant gold in its fields
let me quench my thirst at its rivers
let me rest beneath the shade of its trees
let me wear its dust and wrap its distances around me.
I don't want the shade of lengthening shadows
I have the support of the rays of the rising sun.
The sun has made its energy accessible for my country
the sun and I
the sun and you
cannot walk side by side.
The sun has chosen me for company.

KISHWAR NAHEED