

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century saw a significant number of women receive acclaim for their skill in Urdu prose and poetry. Many of these writers, such as Ada Jafri, Kishwar Naheed, and Fahmida Riaz, have been hailed as voices of feminism by the Urdu literary establishment. However, one prominent poet has been largely ignored as a feminist writer; instead, she has been relegated to the ranks of poets of love and romance. Critics, in restricting themselves to surface-level readings of the love poetry of Parveen Shakir (1952-1994), have overlooked how these and other poems significantly address gender and societal issues. In the following selection of poems, I have sought to highlight Parveen Shakir's engagement with the lives of women, children, and the poor in a society that reserves most of its rights and privileges for upper class men.¹ I suggest that critics have failed to recognize Shakir's poetry as feminist because it does not directly challenge and question male dominance.

Shakir, despite winning several poetry awards and honors, does not appear in Rukhsana Ahmad's canonical work of feminist Urdu poetry from Pakistan, *We Sinful Women* (1991).² This collection, the first of its kind in the world of Urdu literature, includes the poetry of Ada Jafri, Kishwar Naheed, Fahmida Riaz, and Ishrat Afreen, as well as lesser-known feminist poets such as Sara Shagufta and Zehra Nigah. Even on the rare occasion that Parveen Shakir has been included amongst the feminists of Urdu poetry, such as in Ambreen Salahuddin's *Feminism in Modern Urdu Poetesses* (2005)³, she has been referred to as "the poetess of fragrance." *Fragrance*, the title of Parveen

1 These poems have been selected from Parveen Shakir's anthology, *Mah-e-Tamām: Kuliyyāt* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1999).

2 Rukhsana Ahmad, ed., *We Sinful Women* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1991).

3 Ambreen Salahuddin, *Feminism in Modern Urdu Poetesses (1857-2000)* (Lahore, Pakistan: West Pakistan Urdu Academy, 2005).

"JUST A GIRL"
AND OTHER POEMS:
Revisiting the Writings
of Parveen Shakir

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Shakir's first poetry volume, was published when she was twenty-four years old. Although Shakir produced and published several more volumes in the remaining eighteen years of her life, the poetry she composed in these early years, widely recognized as highly *feminine* rather than *feminist*, is foregrounded at the expense of her later work.

As I hope these poems will demonstrate, Parveen Shakir raises awareness about social issues by compelling the reader to empathize with the subjects of her poems, rather than by directly challenging societal norms of patriarchy. Recent scholarship on feminism has shown that feminism is not only practiced through vocal and direct resistance to male dominance. Feminist agency is also acted through strategic silences, and by appropriating and subverting the nature of patriarchal practices normally considered repressive towards women.⁴

This sample of poems demonstrates a spectrum of issues including women in the workplace, sexual harassment, arranged marriage, children's labor, women's experiences of being objects of desire, and even sectarian violence in the city. Most importantly, perhaps, even those works previously categorized as "love poems" deserve reconsideration as many deal with the difficulties faced by women in expressing and experiencing love on their own terms. Urdu poetry composed by women differs from classical Urdu poetry in which women's bodies were the subject of men's lust and fantasies.⁵ The love that women write about in Urdu poetry reflects their own desires and pleasures, their satisfaction with bodily sensations, their disappointment, and even betrayal.⁶ Parveen Shakir used her poetry to give voice to women's experiences of love and romance in Pakistan.

⁴ See Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵ See Christina Oesterheld, "Islam in Contemporary South Asia: Urdu and Muslim Women," *Oriente Moderno*, 23, no. 84 (2004): 217-243.

⁶ *ibid.*

TRANSLATION OF THE TEXT

JUST A GIRL (FROM VOLUME ONE: FRAGRANCE, 1977)

In my cold room,
I am sitting saddened
From half-open windows
Moist winds enter,
Touching my body
Torching it somewhat
Taking your name over and over,
They tickle me

How I wish I had wings,
I would fly to you
How I wish I were the wind
Having touched you I would return
I am not however, anything but,
In iron fortresses
Accused of life-imprisonment,
Just a girl!

NICK NAME (FROM VOLUME TWO: MARIGOLD, 1980)

You call me Doll
You are quite right!
I appear like a doll to all playing hands
Whatever you make me wear will suit me
I do not have a color
Hand me off to any child

I do not oppose anyone
 My waking and thinking eyes
 Whenever you wish take my sight away
 Wind me up and hear (my) words
 Or take away my power of speech
 Fill the parting of my hair, apply vermilion
 Love me; settle me in your eyes
 And then, when you've had your heart's fill
 Take me from your heart and put me away in some niche
 You call me Doll
 You are quite right!

Taking a scorched-like face
 Bending from the tiredness of centuries
 Holding up the drooping shoulders
 Fearing hungry eyes, cat calls that escort her home,
 Dodging those doers of courtesy
 She takes a step
 One stenographer
 Returns to her home
 And gripping a broken wall perhaps she says every day
 Lord!
 Such a day should come
 I should have a roof over my head

STENOGRAPHER (FROM VOLUME TWO: MARIGOLD, 1980)

Before the glittering morning
 When sleep dissolves in the body like honey
 And by the hands of the morning breeze each pain's grip is untied
 At that time of healing
 All raw wounds of the body,
 All parched dreams of the person,
 Waking up considering them worthless
 And surrendering oneself to the season's cruel wind
 All day meaningless numbers
 And purposeless names
 Keep typing mindlessly and with aimless hands
 Occasionally, as the need may demand
 To tolerate the sweet and bitter words of the bald boss
 And like a stone statue, remaining quiet at everything
 Then late in the evening
 When even the birds have returned to their nests
 From the cold furnace of the office

A SAD POEM (FROM VOLUME TWO: MARIGOLD, 1980)

On one side matrimony
 And on the other side
 Is the soul-purifying fire
 Should I keep watching the snow falling on me
 Or grab the hand of light
 O' Lord of water and fire
 Give me my verdict
 Should I be buried alive
 Or grab the hand of life

GHAZAL (FROM VOLUME THREE: SOLILOQUY, 1985)

One day he would have had to bid me farewell
 No matter how much he had loved me

All seasons come and go
The season of sorrow should have also migrated

How could have wolves attained me
Had he protected me

Pride did come across from my tone
It was his right to complain

Some of it was my fault, or why would he
Break off association in this way

I only had but one demand of him
That he should have respected my love

GHAZAL (FROM VOLUME THREE: SOLILOQUY, 1985)

Even a stone may shed tears of blood for a moment
When the promise of dreams is lost forever

May such a rain shower upon my city that
Washes away all hearts and all windows

Until apprehension is the guardian
How can someone sleep at night

Rain and growth are in His hands
But someone has to sew the seeds in dirt

For three seasons, for whom the mother waits
That child is lost in the fourth season

A DIFFICULT QUESTION (FROM VOLUME FOUR: REFUSAL, 1990)

From behind the canvas curtains
A thirteen or fourteen-year-old face peeked
That face
Was fresh like the first blossom of spring
And eyes
Transparent like first love
But in her hands
Were lines from having been cutting vegetables
And in those lines
Were congealed ashes from washing pots
Her hands
Were aged twenty years more than her face!

GHAZAL (FROM VOLUME FIVE: FOAM OF MIRROR, 1996 – PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY)

My city is kindling, the wind is burning
What kind of fire is this in which the wind is melting

Who is this who strolls in the garden brandishing a dagger
From whose fear is the wind changing direction

On whose order did it join in the conspiracy
On whose murder is the wind rubbing its hands

The birds are cowering and the trees are terrified,
With what intention is the wind leaving the house