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Book Reviews

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Shakir, Perveen. *Defiance of the Rose: Selected Poems by Perveen Shakir*. Translated from the original Urdu by Naima Rashid. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2019. 308 pp.; Rs. 995.00.

The translator of *Defiance of the Rose*, Naima Rashid, was a student of foreign languages and literature at Kinnaird College, Lahore in the 1990s (xix). Rashid taught French language and literature in Saudi Arabia and Lahore for two decades (back flap copy). After she left the teaching profession, she took on projects translating works from Urdu to English (xix).

Rashid took on this project in order to give readers a broader look at the complete poetic works of Perveen Shakir (1952–1994). She wanted to give the readers a better understanding of the poet whom she describes as "learned and erudite" (xxi). Shakir was often a target for those who discounted her contribution to the feminist struggle in Pakistan, mostly because a substantial amount of her poetry is about romantic desire. She was celebrated for her romance poetry and she also attracted attention because of her beauty. That she had a male mentor also gave critics ammunition to question her as a feminist (xx–xxi). Rashid's work attempts to provide the reader with a fuller picture of Perveen Shakir as a poet, a woman, a government employee, a mother, and also a feminist.

The acknowledgements section of *Defiance of the Rose* provides the reader with insight into Rashid's years-long process and efforts in completing this project. Rashid thanks numerous people involved. She corresponded and discussed the poems with a range of people and received constructive feedback on her translations and interpretations.

In the introduction, Naima Rashid briefly shares her background. She acknowledges her lack of significant familiarity with Perveen Shakir's poetry and how she became interested in this project after coming across and reading the anthology of Shakir's poetry. She also shares her conception of this translation project, which she describes as "an experiential offering," rather than

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"scholastic" (xxi). Rashid wants readers to experience the poems as a story of the subject of this book (xxi).

The introduction is followed by a note on the present edition, which includes information on the audience research that guided this project. Most readers, Rashid reports, were only interested in the English translations and a number of people who could read Urdu were interested in the addition of the original Urdu poems as well, which are provided in the appendices, along with the transliterations. The transliterations, Rashid informs us, are for the benefit of another group of readers, such as Hindi speakers, or second- and third-generation South Asians who cannot read Urdu but are otherwise conversant in the language and familiar with the culture (xxiii).

The selected one hundred poems in the book are presented in translation and some poem titles are altered. The majority of the selection comprises Perveen Shakir's *naẓm*s (prose-style poetry). However, one *ġhazal* is included, which has been given the title of "Topsy Turvy" (52) (the transliteration and Urdu text can be found on pp. 198–99). The *ġhazal* is translated and presented in the original couplet form, but Rashid makes some creative changes in order to give the *ġhazal* a different kind of rhyme scheme. She is able to achieve this by giving each couplet its own rhyme, rather than use the conventional approach, which would employ the rhyme across the whole *ġhazal*.

Rashid's selection of poems successfully introduces the reader to the breadth of Perveen Shakir's work and the topics and themes she engaged with in her poetry. These include her thoughts on girlhood and womanhood, marriage, the struggles of working women, workplace harassment, a poem to her son with a message of hope, a poem dealing with the challenge of being a female poet in her society, and also poems written to celebrate personalities such as ʿAlī ibn-e Abī Ṭālib (599–661) and Yasir Arafat (1929–2004), which show Shakir's engagement with religious and political themes. Among the last twenty poems are most of Shakir's shorter poems. These poems are short musings, somewhat philosophical in nature, and give insight into another aspect of Shakir's thought process and personality.[1] She was a romantic and a dreamer, whose contribution to the feminist struggle in Pakistan was to normalize in Urdu literature the poetry of romance and desire in a woman's voice.

Defiance of the Rose is a work at the confluence of the scholastic and the artistic. It is as much a work of translation as it is a creative project by the translator, as is seen in the changes and additions made to the original poems. The hundred poems are not presented in a linear manner, arranged by date of

1 The poem "Moon" (115) is an example of such a poem. For the transliteration and original text, see 270–71.

composition. Instead, Rashid presents this selection with an artistic license to create a story through the poems—bookending the selection with poems representing darkness and melancholy, which were intimate parts of Perveen Shakir's personality. In between those ends is represented Perveen Shakir's life—its joys, achievements, sorrows, and challenges, despite which, as Rashid writes, she "survives—a defiant rose" (xxii). Rashid adds footnotes with additional information regarding some poems, though more would be beneficial for the academic reader. The notes appear at the end of the selected poems.

Naima Rashid approaches the translations in multiple ways throughout the book. Through much of the work she does literal translations, staying true to the words in the original poems. However, she also displays her own literary background and taste in the way she interprets the verses to make them accessible to the non-Urdu-speaking reader, while focusing more on the feel of the poems. Rashid explains that like her own poetry, these translations were "received" and flowed through her much differently from how she has translated prose works (xxi). She incorporates rhyme schemes, sometimes making the decision to leave out or change certain parts of the original poems for added clarity of meaning; this seems to be for the benefit of those with less cultural knowledge of the Urdu-speaking world. Rashid's approach makes the translations concise and lyrical, and adds imagery that often does not come across in the original verses.

Naima Rashid's translations of Perveen Shakir's selected poems are an important contribution to the field of Urdu studies. These translations bring to the readers the range of Shakir's work and the broad array of topics and themes she presented in her work. The reader is also given a glimpse of the cultural landscape in which Shakir was composing poetry. Rashid's translation approach and the creative changes she makes helps make this work more accessible for a reader unversed in Urdu and lacking the cultural knowledge needed to appreciate the original poems, were they translated literally.

Here I would like to select and briefly analyze a few examples from the translation. The transliterations the poems that follow are my own. I have made them from Rashid's Urdu edition using the system of the *Journal of Urdu Studies*. The English translations are Rashid's.

Rashid gives the title "The Circle of Life" (2) to the poem "Dā'irah" (circle) (130–31), which is an example of her interpretive approach meant to fit within the schema of the average Western reader. In this poem, Rashid uses her poetic interpretation by translating the verb *ābād karnā* (to populate/settle) as "to christen," which holds Western and literally Christian cultural meaning. And though *reshmīñ tanhā'ī* (silken solitude) is replaced by "silken weave," Rashid manages to capture the mood of the poem.

kahīñ se ko'ī makṛī jhāñktī hai
phir dar o dīvār apnī reshmīñ tanhā'ī se
ābād kartī hai

From some nook or cranny, a spider peeps,
christens the house with its silken weave.

In the poem "Nickname" (4), Rashid deviates from more direct and literal translations in order to capture the essence of the verse while adding imagery and rhyme that is not in the original (134–35).

jo pahnā do, mujh pe sajegā[2]
merā ko'ī rañg nahīñ[3]

Whatever you decree
I will don with glee

Another poem, "Basheer's Wife" (6; "Bashīr kī Ghar-vālī," 139–41), contains an example of a change made, perhaps, for better cultural understanding, in which she changes the original *bhāg ga'ī* (ran away) to "could elope":

aisī kaṛī naẓar rakhī
jaise żarā sī chūk hu'ī
aur tū bhāg ga'ī

An iron gaze was now cast
on all your doings,
comings and goings-
the merest slip,
and you could elope

In "Karachi" (14; Urdu poem on pp. 148–49) a poem Perveen Shakir wrote as a lament over the dismal state of her hometown, Rashid uses her creative license by using the translation "from across the planet's rim" to convey the meaning, instead of a literal translation, which would be closer to "anyone coming from mountains, plains, and deserts." She also creates a certain imagery with

2 Literally, "Whatever you dress me in/whatever you put on me is what suits me."
3 Literally, "I am colorless/I do not have a color."

the addition of "as daylight peeps through the curtain's flap," which is not in the original.

Karāchī
ek aisī besvā hai
jis ke sāth
pahāṛoñ, maidānoñ aur ṣaḥrā'oñ se āne vālā
har sā'iz ke baṭve kā ādmī
rāt guzārtā hai
aur ṣubḥ uṭhte hī
us ke dāhne ruḳhsār par
ek thappaṛ rasīd kartā hai …

Karachi is that dispensable whore
that, from across the planet's rim,
any man with wallet fat or slim,
spends the night with at his whim,
and when he is done with her,
as soon as daylight peeps through the curtain's flap,
on her right cheek, gives a tight slap …

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