

PARVEEN SHAKIR

## Poems

[*Translator's Introduction:* Parveen Shakir (1952–1994) is a confessional poet par excellence. She lays bare her heart and makes a clean breast of all that she has done and endured. Her poetry is highly subjective and an expression of her feelings, sentiments and moods. Her command of language enables her to bring forth perfect poetry out of personal trauma.

*Khushbū* (Fragrance), her first collection of poems, consists of both ghazals and *nazms*. These are the confessions of an adolescent girl nurturing fond hopes and romantic dreams, far too romantic in a world of grim realities, and they lay bare a psyche which is both enigmatic and unpredictable. For instance,

A whole lifetime is required to know full  
well what beauty is,  
for girls do not reveal themselves in  
momentary encounters.

And elsewhere:

Strange are the sorrows of girls; their joys  
far stranger.  
They laugh and giggle even as their eyes  
moisten.

“Fragrance” has long been a powerful symbol for the evanescent and elusive lover/beloved. But here, unlike elsewhere, flower symbolizes the one who loves deeply and sincerely only to suffer from neglect and mortification, being left to dry and wither. The delicacy and subtlety of feeling and emotion, and the handling of words with a touch as smooth and delicate as silk make Parveen Shakir’s poetry “a thing of beauty” which “is a joy forever.”

Love—fancy, fantasy, ecstasy of union, pangs of parting, indifference and fickleness from the beloved, and other nuances of fascination with the opposite sex—has been the predominant theme of poetry, particularly the ghazal. A ghazal is an expression of love, passion, heartache, the indifference of “*la belle dame sans merci*,” of dejection and frustration, of longing and languor. We get all these things in Parveen Shakir’s poetry. The only difference here is that she looks at things from her own, i.e., her female perspective—a perspective which has hitherto been lacking in Urdu poetry.

Parveen Shakir is extremely deft at handling the delicate and brittle theme of love. She makes use of irony and sarcasm but her tone seldom sounds harsh or brusque. Look for instance at the following lines:

I am the bride whom on the first night  
someone unveils and tells:  
“All I have is yours alone  
Save only my heart.”

Resting his head on my shoulder today  
he wept for someone to his heart’s content.

Her subsequent collections—*Sadbarg* (Hundred Leaves), *Khud-Kalāmī* (Soliloquy), *Inkār* (Denial), and her posthumous collection *Kaf-e Ā’ina*—emerge from the debris of her shattered dreams. They are expressions of devastation and disillusionment, of a heart crushed by betrayal and a mind too shocked to reconcile and come to terms with the world of difference between then and now. The insensitivity and fickleness of one’s beloved is a recurrent theme. It emerges as the leitmotif in all her later poems. Although a fairly common subject, this universal, eternal heartache turns into fine, delicate poetry in her hands.

Parveen Shakir is not a confessional poet à la Sylvia Plath, whom she certainly may have read during her college years. Parveen Shakir’s milieu is an altogether different one—comparatively more prohibitive, more oppressive, and more claustrophobic. Yet she is not as egocentric or suicidal as Plath. Though her personal tragedy is ubiquitous in her poems, she moves from personal to general and universal concerns and empathizes with the lesser mortals who do not share her privileges. This empathy and commiseration over the sufferings of others mitigates her own.

The beloved in Parveen Shakir's poetry has often been compared to fragrance and clouds, both evanescent and elusive. The following lines, the most popular in her *oeuvre*, powerfully capture this imagery:

He is the fragrance that will disperse in the  
wind.  
Now the question is what will become of  
the flower.

And elsewhere:

Call him a cloud or a star or a breeze.  
He seemed elusive in the substance of her  
being.

Her later poems portray moods of isolation, betrayal, and resignation. A few of them are striking expressions of maternal feelings and the experiences of motherhood. Poems about her only son, Murad, convey with great sensitivity the mother-son relationship in which the son, again like the beloved, moves slowly but surely away from his doting mother who, as she grows older, wants the care and attention of her son. In one such poem she says:

I don't care a damn for the dark.  
On each and every gloomy path  
of all the forthcoming nights,  
there shines a moon  
—your cute, lovely face.

Though her work abounds in poetry about the female psyche and predicament, very few of her poems display the brash outspokenness of overtly feminist poems. The one that comes closest to what might be called feminist is "Bashir ki Gharvāli" (Bashir's Wife). Here she fulfils the criterion of a "true wit" who, according to Alexander Pope, excels in the description of "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed."

Parveen Shakir passed her life in a brisk, nay breezy way, as if she were in a hurry to meet a literal deadline. She leaped into fame when just out of her teens; became a college English teacher; passed her Civil Services examinations gloriously; got married; gave birth to her only child, a son; got separated; became a celebrity in her early twenties; rose to the rank of Commissioner; wrote her own epitaph and an obituary of sorts; got her complete works published and that too coincidentally entitled "Māh-e Tamām" (The Full Moon), as if

she had some prescience of impending death, as if she somehow knew that the clock of life was ticking a bit too fast and would come full circle shortly. The demise of the 42-year-old poet in a car accident in the wee hours of a late December morning left the Urdu world shell-shocked. Reality came to her in blows and so did death.

Parveen Shakir carved a niche for herself in Urdu poetry. The poems she has left behind are treasured assets of Urdu literature. In her death Urdu lost a poet of tremendous potential.]

#### YOUR ATTITUDE

Your attitude toward me has been like  
a seasoned diplomat's toward a young  
journalist  
—every statement heedful of its  
implications  
and possible repercussions,  
every word carefully weighed  
(the issue lost in the quagmire of  
quotations).  
Nothing that he says should turn out to  
be  
an arrow recoiling on himself  
(which he may have to repent).

#### KANRAS

The eyes downcast,  
the tone enervated,  
sentences uttered in fragments,  
lashes covered in dust  
and sunburnt face.  
Bowing his unkempt head has come  
a long lost friend.  
The heart is tempted to take hold of his  
hand,  
to rush immediately to kiss his brow,  
and never allow him to go back alone.

But deep within me someone whispers:  
all this is feigned, phantasm, façade.  
Don't ever believe!  
Don't ever believe!

THE PICNIC

Standing in the middle of the sea,  
my friends giggle and guffaw.  
While I, sitting alone on the shore,  
either count the passing waves and  
ripples  
or write on sodden sands  
your name.

SHE AT HER VANITY BOX

Droplets glistening on tresses,  
like strings of crystal beads.  
Each orifice exuding the odor of a  
nubile frame.  
The center parting resplendent  
with a thin vermilion line.  
A chaplet of jasmine buds around dark,  
wavy locks;  
another adorning curvaceous arms.  
Gold rings, thick and lustrous, hanging  
from earlobes.  
Around the neck a garland  
the greenish light of glowworm.  
White dots of sandalwood paste  
over the arched eyebrows.  
A *bindiya* coruscating in between.  
Two lines of kajal gracing  
green, razor-sharp eyes.  
Crimson cheeks betraying  
the ayes and ways of the heart.  
Luscious lips turned ruby red

thanks to the beau's forwardness.  
Each tinkling bangle proclaiming  
who of all the world he is.  
Though gently does she try to walk,  
the house echoes with the rhythm  
of her jingling payals.  
She looks at herself in the mirror and  
    blushes;  
she looks and turns scarlet.  
Is it this youthful female form  
that makes the world throb?

ADVICE

Little girl!  
Don't build sand castles  
so close to the shore.  
Some wayward wave might come along  
and wash them away in a single sway.  
The memory will sadden you  
and haunt you all your life.

OTHELLO

I dial my own number on my phone  
and think how long his phone remains  
    engaged.  
It pains my heart:  
who is it that he talks to  
so often, for so long?

THE VIOLET

It was a little violet by a mossy stone  
That breathed the wild wind of the  
    woods.  
Seduced by its natural, pristine beauty,

a tourist gently plucked it and took it  
home.  
He placed it in a fancy crystal vase in  
the drawing room.  
The eyes of all who came did fall  
first on the purple flower.  
Sprinkles of praise and showers of  
plaudits  
kept it wet and swamped it.  
O that someone could tell them all:  
The little purple bud feels smothered  
by the sophisticated, citified smell  
of gold leaf and chenille;  
it pines again for the fresh air of the  
woods.

#### CRITICISM AND CREATION

“Your poetry is only a fragrance  
penetrating the heart,  
placing soft, dewy hands on the soul.  
But as for its real effect on the mind,  
it’s touch-and-go.  
Now you must put some color into it;  
try to present some lofty ideal, some  
novel creed,  
some esoteric philosophy in obscure  
incomprehensible diction.  
There must be at least some depth in  
your thought.”

“You are right.  
But see,  
my art is in its infancy  
(please let it dream and don’t entangle  
it  
in such ponderous intellectualism).  
I don’t want my art to grow old  
even before it has attained its youth

and to walk on the crutches of  
philosophy.”

THE DANCE

On a shiny aqua marble floor,  
there trembles like the half moon  
the image of a twisting torso.  
The light music of the wind's violin  
flows like lovers' whispers in cool  
darkness.

Beyond the hubbub of unfamiliar faces,  
amidst comparative calm,  
this unacquainted companion  
—serving my heart's illusion—  
has held me in his solicitous arms.  
As if my woes and pains would find  
solace upon his shoulders.

Exhausted, I close my eyes  
and lean my head on his arms,  
like a traveler having lost his way  
reclines his head against a shady tree.  
The dreamy gleam and the soothing  
tune  
through his filtering deep breathing—  
is sowing green stars in my blood.  
Pink veins are emerging in the night's  
tipsy eyes.

Leaning on his chest I sleepwalk,  
lightly as a lotus on the lake of ecstasy.  
As if a slightly heavier step would dent  
water.

One after another this weary soul  
is casting off the garments of grief.  
Gradually I feel the earth moving under  
my feet.

And now it seems I have left it beneath ...  
With a dizzy pace I soar upward,

upward into space ... Now on the  
 clouds ...  
 Now above the clouds ...  
 Now near the stars ...  
 Now up above the stars ...  
 Higher ... Higher ... Still higher ...

THE DAUGHTER OF MUTUAL ENEMIES

In a small Chinese restaurant,  
 amidst twilight alluring as the Odes of  
 Keats,  
 my nationalist colleagues and I sat,  
 witnessing the aroma rise from the soup  
 and change into physical satiety.  
 From topics as multifarious as “The  
 Wind Cannot Read,”  
 the Taj Mahal,  
 Mysore silk,  
 and the saris of Benaras,  
 the chit-chat passed on to Indo-Pak  
 politics:  
 ’65—then ’71—POWs—  
 Amritsar TV—Pakistani culture—  
 New fronts—the warning bell—  
 My vociferous colleagues were incensed  
 at this aggression.  
 When I wanted to say something, they  
 grimaced  
 as though they were offered quinine  
 instead of soup.  
 Even the restaurateur’s otherwise genial  
 wife  
 gave me a resentful look  
 (maybe some arrow from ’62 pricked  
 her heart to this day).  
 As though the pique and spleen  
 of a high blood pressure patient  
 had entered the nerves of the restaurant.

Had the tension lingered a little longer,  
We'd have suffered brain hemorrhages.  
But meanwhile the orchestra came to a  
halt  
and from the background emerged  
Lata's honeyed mellifluous voice  
as though in a congested sweltering  
room  
a window had opened by the side of the  
sea.  
I witnessed—the cool, unseen hands of  
melody  
were sprinkling the dew drops  
on the tense, taut and twisted faces and  
frames.  
The distorted, disfigured faces became  
smooth again.  
My nationalist colleagues sat silent and  
immobile,  
resting their chins in cupped hands  
as the magic of Music was afloat.  
Under the table the restaurateur's genial  
wife  
was tapping her soft, pink feet to the  
tune.  
Enfolding us in the arms of translucent,  
silken tunes  
the daughter of mutual enemies  
was dancing like a mutual beloved.

—*Translated by Mahmudul Hasani*