BOOK REVIEW

Fahmida Riaz. *Four Walls and a Black Veil: Urdu Poems with English Translations.* Foreword by Aamer Hussein. Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe, Rukhsana Ahmad and Baider Bakht. Poetry from Pakistan Series. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004. 138 pp. Rs. 275.00. ISBN 0 19 597711 4.

There is something shocking about Fahmida Riaz's poems, shocking and familiar. That arc of electricity that is in her work is present in much of twentieth-century Urdu fiction. The shock runs from the long-ago anthology *Añgārē*, quickly banned, with its inflammatory stories that seared religion and sex, to Manto's unforgettable "K̲h̲ōl Dō," and onwards throughout the work of Ismat Chughtai. Fahmida Riaz's work has the feel of the long "tradition of shock" as well.

Of course, the Urdu reader knows this. Riaz is writing within that now well-established tradition, like so many other Urdu writers who teeter on the edge of what is permissible and then pass beyond it to transgress. Their words dance on the fine knife-edge of sexual and societal norms, of religious beliefs, all the more powerful because so much in that society can shock. A public, female voice inflames even more.

In many societies, for a variety of reasons, the power to shock in writing has diminished. Writers in the old Soviet Union could rivet their audiences with banned political observations and garner huge underground followings. English poets in the 1960s used obscenities to offend or startle audiences into a kind of transfixed attention. But now, for the most part, words no longer shock. No one cares. In Riaz's literary universe, on the other hand, the power to shock has grown, if possible, stronger. Stepping outside the norm, transgressing boundaries and writing of certain subjects is to court physical danger, even death. This is the background against which Riaz works her themes of love and bonding, of the experience of being female, of eroticism and of encounters with officialdom.

Riaz's work and the identity she asserts for herself is shocking, of course, to the "obscurantists" (Pakistanis' own codeword for the aggressively religious fundamentalists). Her identity is shocking as well to those who see her muhajir ethnicity as not fully Pakistani, as fraught with the potential of an unpatriotic identification with India. These two groups have dismissed her as a "nymphomaniac," as Riaz herself comments (!) and/or a traitor. Indeed, she was in self-imposed exile in India for much of General Zia's reign. And in 2000, Fahmida Riaz had the dubious pleasure of being attacked by right-wing Hindus—verbally, and potentially physically (there was a gun waved)—at a presentation at Jawaharlal

Nehru University in New Delhi.

So Riaz, and her poetry, have managed to enrage "them" for a long time. And there is truly something just flat out shocking in what she is willing to say, in her delicate bluntness, in her face-off with her surroundings. Her words grab you, as she might express it herself, by the hair. Even early poems like "The Soft Fragrance of My Jasmine" startle with their intimacy. This is Sharpe's translation:

> The soft fragrance of my jasmine
> Floats on the breeze
> Plays with the hand of the wind,
> Is setting off in search of you. (4)

But in poems like "The Rain God" (Sharpe's translation of "*Mēg<u>h</u> Dūt*"), Riaz increases the intensity. "Eyes closed, arms outstretched, I run, / I run, touching his blue body to mine." (*Aur maiñ āñk<u>h</u> mūnd kar / hāt<u>h</u> pasāre hū'e / dauṛtī čalī ga'ī / añg sē lagā rahī / nīl us kē añg kā*) (16–17). Full tilt, she runs into the embrace of a Hindu god, or of a lover, or both. It is similar to the way she confronts the reader: her words outstretched, her eyes closed, waiting for the reciprocal embrace. And the intimate shock of "Deep Kiss"? Listen to her capture the rhythm of lovemaking in the lines

> Kiss.
> Wet, warm, dark.
> Pitch black!
> Like a moonless night,
> when rain comes flooding in. (38)

This collection of her poems, with selections spanning forty years of her writing, translated into English in one volume (a first for Riaz, who heretofore has appeared in translation only in anthologies) does not disappoint, and contains much of what makes her unique. Because the book is in dual-text format, her original words are always available in Urdu. But before looking more at the poems and their translations, in the conventional manner of a review, there is something that should be mentioned about *Four Walls and a Black Veil*.

It was hard for me to articulate my initial feelings about this book, but I was definitely uneasy over the translations. It was not because they were not generally good, or accurate, and not because of anything in the presentation of the poems that I could describe initially. The translations were not exactly uneven, but the English seemed occasionally off, though that was not quite the problem either. Indeed, this sequence of sentences describing my reaction, filled with the word "not," captures my hesitations. I had contributed to the *Annual of Urdu Studies* on several occasions and never plagued the editor with a dilatory submission, but my pen, so to speak, was frozen. There was something muffled, almost mute, in the book, as if something was missing. What?

Finally, in November 2005, I wrote to M. U. Memon about my reservations. I simply could not get a handle on the interaction between Patricia Sharpe, Fahmida Riaz and the poems. As far as I could tell from the volume in front of me, Patricia Sharpe had provided twenty-six of the thirty-six translations, with Rukhsana Ahmad doing the remainder, and one collaboration with Baider Bakht noted. In order to write the review, I needed to know what Sharpe had thought about what she was doing. Riaz herself had written brief endnotes on seventeen of the poems. Aamer Hussein, in his preface, said, "The translators of this volume have worked assiduously to give us a reflection of the power and beauty of the originals" (xvi). But there was no mention of Sharpe, specifically, nor of Rukhsana Ahmad, in the foreword. This was strange. After all, Hussein's piece was the foreword to a collection of translations. Where was an acknowledgment of the translators? How did this foreword connect to the production of these translations? And Fahmida Riaz is a living poet—did she have nothing to say about the actual work of the translations?

At its simplest, the question did indeed come back to "Where were the translators?" Since Sharpe had done the bulk of the work, where was she? Of course, one can produce translations without explanation. But it was unusual to have such carefully worked translations of poems by a contemporary poet, in which the translator's voice, explicating her decisions and casting light on her solutions, was absent. How did Riaz and Sharpe work together? Did they work together at all? What choices did Sharpe make? What did Riaz contribute to the effort?

In January 2006 I read a web posting by Patricia Sharpe, dated April 2005 (see http://www.typepad.com/t/trackback/2210642). Sharpe and Riaz had in fact worked closely, wrote Sharpe, but something had gone wrong later with the book's production. The genesis of *Four Walls and a Black Veil*, as a translated text, was indeed flawed. In her blog, Sharpe took issue with how her translations had been handled, and hinted at some real dirty dealing. Was she forced to accept a shared byline? Whatever had happened, it was more than clear that this book had a troubled history. The strange absence in the work of the voice of the primary translator, which I had noted from the beginning, and which had inhibited my reactions, was explained. Sharpe's blog ended my reluctance to write a review of the book, for finally the voice of the translator, so muted, emerged loud and clear and angry. Sharpe wrote (and I quote at length, because she needs to be heard):

> Fahmida is a dear friend whose work fascinates me. I want you to run out and buy this book right away, and yet I worry about that, because this volume is seriously flawed. Let me tell you why.
>
> About half of these poems were translated by me, the other half by Rukhsana Ahmad, who was born in Pakistan but now lives in the U.K. (OUP has done her the disservice of attributing the translation of "The Doll" to me. I expect this error will be rectified in subsequent editions.) […]

> You see, I am puzzled by the strange acknowledgment attached to this volume, in which someone is thanked for "having enormously improved the quality of these renditions." I cannot speak for Rukhsana, but the final version of the poems I translated was prepared last spring, sitting with Fahmida at my dining table in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Sometimes we savored a perfected translation. Sometimes we struggled to find a better equivalent in English. If Fahmida had been dissatisfied with the quality of any passage, we would have resolved the problem then and there. As old friends, we know how to be frank with one another. And "renditions" is not a word she would have used! So who really wrote that passage?
>
> In fact, the politics of producing this volume were complex in ways it is painful to relate. An early version of my manuscript was appropriated and turned into a text so toneless, so tedious that I threatened to withdraw my material, every line, every word, with Fahmida's concurrence, though we both feared such action would scuttle the project. At this point, it seems, I was also supposed to accept a shared by-line, which I also refused. It's ridiculously easy to tinker with a text someone else has sweat over. So I produced a final draft, as Fahmida, though not the publisher evidently, had planned. The opportunist, obviously, was forced to settle for that strange acknowledgment.
>
> You would find it dreadfully boring were I to cite each desecration masquerading as an "improvement." But here are some guidelines to crimes against language that any reader of this blog knows I could not commit. When you come upon passages that are opaque and disfigured with awkward syntax, you've found an "improvement." When you stumble over passages that are wordy, toneless and out of sync with the rhythms of English, you are blessed with an "improvement." If you frown over words that are merely generic, that do not take advantage of the enormous English word-hoard, these also are not of my doing; they are the "improvements."

I quote from this blog at such length because it helps explain a great deal about the book, especially the feeling that the translator is absent. For the reviewer, it also puts one in the curious position of being told that infelicities of translation are not the translator's! And I did indeed note awkward things that seemed strange to me from the beginning. Besides, both the identity of Riaz and her primary translator, insofar as it related to translation, were obscured in this book. Now, here was Sharpe saying that she had been wronged, and that her work was overwritten and mangled by others. Sharpe continues:

> To conclude this painful recitation I must note that yet another name has been linked with mine in the by-line to "In the City Court." As usual, the interventions are of little substance even as they damage tone, harmony, comprehension. To the owner of that name I say: tinkering, then

> taking credit, is a form of intellectual theft of which no poet in his own right should be proud.

If it is possible to leave these issues aside in reviewing this book, it is certainly helped by the fact that the format is dual text. The existence of a collection of Fahmida Riaz's poems that spans her lifetime of writing, translated into English, with the Urdu poems provided, is a fine contribution to the increasing body of contemporary Urdu poetry available in English. And because Riaz's poems achieve much of their effect through the speaker's unexpected stance and provocative assertions, her fiery writing and fine images survive whatever damage may have been done to the English translations later (as Sharpe says herself). *Four Walls and a Black Veil* (In Urdu: "*Čādar aur Čār Dīvārī*" (The Veil and Four Walls)) does not mince words or ideas. From the above-mentioned "Rain God," to the title poem, to "Condolence Resolution," Riaz is a powerful presence, not lost in English.

As mentioned, Fahmida Riaz herself has provided a brief gloss in an appendix of almost half of the poems. The poet's own observations on her work and her intent are invaluable. The poems invite play and discovery, while two recurring issues, always present in translation, emerge. These are the issues of the mechanics of translation (grammar, rhyme, organization) and of the access to the cultural universe of the poet.

We can see that a specific translation can ultimately center on the difficulty of making decisions: whether or not to stick close to the original, to keep word order, and even whether to make the translation rhyme if the original does. In other words, this is the issue of "mechanics." We can also see that it is necessary to look at translated poems that are not immediately accessible, because they may be about cultural issues, personalities, or require a deeper understanding of the literary landscape than an English reader might have, while at the same time being important poems. This is the issue of "cultural access." Two of the poems, the title poem and the poem to Firaq Gorakhpuri, are good examples of each train of thought—the question of mechanics and the question of access to the literary culture. At the intersection of mechanics and cultural access lies the heart of a translated poem. By exploring these two poems more deeply, and thinking about how they were translated, we can see how these two issues play out.

The translation of the poem "Four Walls and a Black Veil" (94) provides good material for exploring the translator's decisions. Of this poem, literally "(The) Veil and Four Walls" ("*Čādar aur Čār Dīvārī*"), Riaz writes in her endnotes, "All religions have been interpreted by men who have considered women infinitely inferior to men, in fact no more than chattel. Islam is no exception to this rule" (137). The poem then illustrates this idea with powerful images of sexual exploitation, in a series of pleadings and questions to a male authority figure.

This poem grounds its power in the positioning and very specific language of the speaker. The mechanics of its translation are thrown into relief because the

translation shifts the position of the speaker somewhat. Indeed, even in its title we see a grammatical and organizational shift. The Urdu title works outward from the woman in the veil to the walls that she sees. The English translation, by switching the order of the nouns, works the other way—from the walls inward. The translated title refocuses the point of view. The English loses the internal rhyming and alliteration of the Urdu as well, but adds an adjective—"black." There is also no definite article in Urdu, and the English translation has provided the indefinite "a." Would it have been better to be more literal: "(The) Veil and Four Walls"? Open questions, decisions that must be made, and presumably Riaz and Sharpe agreed on the translation of the title, and title poem.

To look now at a few lines of Sharpe's English translation of the title poem:

> The hapless, cowering girl-child
> Whose blood will stain your gray beard red.
> Life has no more tears to shed; it shed them all
> In that fragrant chamber where for ages now,
> This sacrificial drama has played (96, 98)

The original Urdu runs like this:

> *Yeh baččiyāñ haiñ!*
> *Keh jin kē sar par pẖirā jō Ḥaẓrat ka dast-e shafqat*
> *To kam-sinī kē lahū se rīsh-e sapēd rañgīn hō gaʾī hai*
> *Ḥuẓūr kē ḥajlaʾ-e muʿaṯṯar mēñ zindagī khūn rō gaʾī hai* (99)

And a very literal translation (not Sharpe's) would be:

> These are girls!
> When Your Excellency's hand of mercy caressed their heads (passed over their heads)
> The greybeard was stained with the blood of youth
> In Your Highness's perfumed chamber life has wept blood

In both Sharpe's translation and in the more literal one, the sense of shock remains, even as the English approximation takes some of the acid away: "The hapless cowering girl-child / Whose blood will stain your gray beard red" is Sharpe. The Urdu is even more electric; the first line of that stanza in Urdu is: "*Yeh baččiyāñ haiñ!*" (These are girls!). Immediately, the whole idea of a desecration of youth is in the forefront. The rearrangement of the syntax in the translation has muffled this idea.

The Urdu continues: "*Keh jin kē sar par pẖirā jō Ḥaẓrat ka dast-e shafqat*" (When Your Excellency's hand of mercy caressed their heads (passed over their heads). This line is not translated into English, and the image of His Excellency's ironic "hand of mercy" has been cut. I wonder about this omission, for this image has a lot of reverberation. And should the translation distinguish between

"*Ḥuẓūr*" and "*Ḥaẓrat*?" I would argue yes, because it shows the speaker's use of many terms for a superior, suggesting the complexity and the importance of the hierarchy. A simple "Sire" won't suffice here. But these are again, quibbles, the kind of quibbles one has when thinking about the mechanics of translation.

Then the Urdu of the following line: "*To kam-sinī kē lahū se rīsh-e sapēd rañgīn hō ga'ī hai*" is translated "The hapless, cowering girl-child / Whose blood will stain your gray beard red." "*Ḥuẓūr kē ḥajla'-e mu'aṯṯar mēñ zindagī khūn rō ga'ī hai*" is rendered in English "Life has no more tears to shed; it shed them all / In that fragrant chamber …" Would the more literal "Life has wept blood in His Eminence's fragrant bridal pavilion" be better? Perhaps not. The blood, of virgins, on beards, is lost in the English. Quibbling aside, this accumulation of images—heads, hands, blood—focuses the reader on the corporeal. At the same time the elegant, frozen phrases "*Ḥaẓrat*" (Excellency), "bridal pavilion" and "hand of mercy" lend a traditional stateliness to the atmosphere of the poem. Traditional expressions and spaces give a heavy legitimacy to, essentially, a nightmare.

Still thinking in terms of the mechanics of translation, "Four Walls and a Black Veil" has a very particular grammatical progression and organization in Urdu. The English translation does not keep that progression and structure. The translator has made certain choices about these progressions when confronting the original poem. Indeed, the translator must make these difficult choices to achieve her result.

The Urdu lines of this poem are very short, though, and the longer lines of the English translation lose the kind of staccato sound of a panicked person addressing someone in a position of power. And in this case, maybe losing also some of the organization of the Urdu poem is a disadvantage to the translated result. For example, the very first word of the poem in Urdu is "*Ḥuẓūr!*" (Excellency). Underlings preface remarks with this kind of address. When the English poem starts with "What shall I do, Sire?," I think some of the supplication in the voice is lost. Beggars, pleaders, the weak, invoke the high. They do not start with a question. They start with simply trying to attract attention to a being as humble as they. So the lone salutation of the Urdu poem calls attention to the weakness of the speaker. (Actually, in the translation "Condolence Resolution," the invocation "Friends!" is also not used. Again, invocations are important, and their structural, grammatical and ultimately social function should not be lost.) But perhaps this is a quibble.

Discussing the stanza that contains the line "These are girls," Riaz comments that "very young girls may be given in marriage to very old men. No religion in the world forbids marriage of a girl-child with a much older man" (137). When Riaz writes "*Ḥuẓūr kē ḥajla'-e mu'aṯṯar mēñ ēk lāsha paṛā hū'ā hai*" (97) (A corpse lies in His Excellency's perfumed chamber), there is a crystalline immediacy to her images, and the social reformer voice of her explanation disappears in graphic, even unbearable, poetic images.

In a postscript to the discussion of these sorts of mechanics (and again, these

are possibly quibbles), we can read "*Guṛyā*" (Doll) (8–9). Sharpe notes that this was Ahmad's translation, which in fact demonstrates that solving mechanical problems are every translator's burden, and Sharpe and Ahmad both had to make certain decisions. In this case, we could argue that a more literal approach—more conservative choices about the mechanics of translation—may have added something to the tone of the English result. The original poem's tone itself is very literal. "*Guṛyā*" is a descriptive poem about an inanimate object that in the course of reading becomes symbolic of a woman's lived experience, and her feelings. The Urdu voice is matter-of-fact. But the translation is somewhat romantic, which detracts from the deliberately brittle tone of the Urdu.

"Doll" starts out "*Čẖōṭī sī hai / Is liyē aččẖī lağtī hai*" (She is small / That is why she looks so nice), which sounds much the way one talks to a little girl, or about a doll—one says, "Oh, so tiny, so cute, so sweet!" Even all those long "e" vowel sounds let the listeners know one is talking to a small, cute thing "ee," "ee," "ee." Diminutives are ever thus. Ahmad's English translation is more distanced, as if the poet is thinking, and even editorializing, rather than simply reacting to a doll. Ahmad's English translation is "Small... / So small… / So pleasing—that's what she is meant for." The voice of someone talking to a "doll" is lost. But of course, this is just one in the thousands of choices that Ahmad made when confronted with the mechanics of translation.

Leaving mechanics aside, the translator must deal with problems of cultural and literary milieu. "For Firaq Gorakhpuri: A Great Indian Poet" (110) exemplifies the difficulty of giving the non-native speaker access to the literary world of the poet and her subjects. In the long tradition of Urdu poets writing about other poets, of eulogies and elegies, Riaz has written an elegy for Firaq Gorakhpuri. Just as Iqbal wrote a eulogy for Dāġ, and Josh wrote one for Tagore, and for that matter, so many wrote poems in praise of Faiz after his death, so Riaz writes for Firaq. Thus, her poem is in a long tradition of Urdu poets saluting their fellow poets.

When questions of cultural access and literary history are paramount, as in this poem, the English-only reader loses a lot. At the same time, Riaz's images are so compelling that the English reader still reads a powerful poem. But how much is inaccessible! Riaz's endnotes provide the only gloss on the poem.

> Firaq was a great poet of Urdu. He was a Hindu Brahman and embodied the secular tradition of India. (Urdu is the national language of Pakistan.)
>
> Firaq lived in Allahabad, in Uttar Pradesh, India.
>
> *Triveni*: The sacred confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. It is believed that a third river Saraswati also joins these two rivers at Allahabad ... but it has concealed itself from the human eye. Saraswati is also the goddess of the Arts. This attribute gives an added dimension to this stanza.
>
> This poem is an elegy for Firaq who died in 1983, when the poet [Riaz]

> lived in India in exile. (138)

What an extremely complicated poem "*Naẓar-e Firāq*" (For Firaq Gorakhpuri) (111) is, as it uses images from a sort of "eternal India," of sacred rivers and local vegetation, coconuts, sandalwood and idols, to remind the Pakistani reader his or her roots are here. And Firaq himself, the Hindu, writing in Urdu, using traditional genres like the ghazal and the *rubāʿī*—what of him? Even within the set of images Riaz has used there lies another twist. Ghazals and poems in other traditional genres, the kinds of poems that Firaq wrote, often made no use of visual artifacts like the ones in this poem. Just as easily would Firaq have written of wine and roses. Where are his allegiances, with his dedication to the highest expressions of Urdu literary culture? An educated Urdu reader knows the long, illustrious career Firaq had as a professor of English at Allahabad University, just as an educated English reader knows that T. S. Eliot worked in a bank. But the English reader of Riaz's poem does not know the first thing about Firaq, nor does he or she know the tale of a ghazal-writing Hindu homosexual holding up the standard of classical Urdu poetry into the 1980s, and influencing generations of cosmopolitan Allahabadis.

The context that Riaz's note gives will more likely help an Urdu speaker from Pakistan, unfamiliar with the river symbolism, than it will help someone not from South Asia or the Urdu literary tradition to understand who Firaq was and why Riaz would write an elegy to him. This is not a criticism of Riaz's notes—far from it! It is an observation about how much must be explained—in fact, too much.

The images do compel, even if not all their potent messages are accessible. The poet (Riaz) is in India, looking at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, at the city of Allahabad. The poem does not mention the city, nor Firaq's long association with it. So the beginning of the translated poem sets a very ancient scene.

> At Triveni, the place
> of three waters, where Ganga
> and Yamuna flow together:
> A waterbird rising, its trailing feet
> inscribe the surface. (110)

The uninformed reader does get something here, but all South Asians with the appropriate literary background would know immediately why a poem about Firaq started at the confluence of the two rivers (because that is where he lived).

A line that is unglossed by either Sharpe or Riaz is:

> Visitors from Pakistan to the land
> that was once their own. A garland
> of bruised marigolds floating by. (*ibid.*)

The Urdu lines contain the word "muhājir" so that the Pakistani visitor is

given a very political, rooted-in-the-past location in this Indian landscape. Marigolds floating in the river can have a number of symbolic significances. Again, nothing is explained for the English-only reader. Nevertheless, the poem, with its final wish for Firaq's reincarnation, and its meditation on art flowing on, like the river, is still able to convey levels of regret, and a profound appreciation of the timelessness of nature and the river. The reader who does not know Urdu literary and cultural history will miss a number of reverberations beyond that of the vantage point of a "muhājir."

All controversy about the publication of this volume aside (and it sounds like there was plenty), these translations are a timely and welcome addition to the growing corpus of Urdu poetry available in English. The two poems I have looked at more closely highlight some of the translators' dilemmas, but these come with the territory. Fahmida Riaz is a remarkable poet writing at a remarkable time in the history of Urdu literature. While it is fair to argue that women have played a central role in the development of Urdu prose—where would Urdu literature be without the short stories of Ismat Chughtai and the novels of Qurratulain Hyder?—Urdu poetry has always been a men's club. Contemporary women poets—Ada Jafri, Parveen Shakir, Zohra Nigah, Kishwar Naheed, Sara Shagufta—still are often viewed as "intruders" in the house of Urdu poetry.

Shocking as she can be, somehow Fahmida Riaz is no longer an intruder. She is a resident of the house of Urdu poetry, writing her poems, along with fiction, essays and non-fiction. Her voice is not that of an interloper, but her own. At a time when the Urdu world is becoming ever more conservative, her poetry is charting new territory. Her earliest poems are widely read and quoted and her new ones are eagerly awaited. Always politically engaged, never afraid to take sides, especially when it is dangerous and unpopular, it is wonderful that she can now be read in English. And she even instructs us on her posthumous reputation, as she tells her friends how to remember her in (Sharpe's translation) "Condolence Resolution":

> "She always said what she had to say
> And for all her life had no regrets." (120)

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