



Revisiting Perveen Shakir

Why is Perveen Shakir so frequently and frustratingly remembered only as a swooning romantic?

Like most of my contemporaries, I had grown up with a certain notion of Perveen Shakir as a poet. While on one hand, she was easily the most popular and best-known, both by virtue of her work and her person, on the other hand, in popular imagination, she was always dismissed as a lesser poet.

This was particularly more pronounced because she was always compared with female heavy weights in the region, towering figures of feminism such as Fehmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed. According to one source, Riaz, who often dismissed her as a softie, called her a 'wimp of a woman.'

Subconsciously, this image kept me, and I imagine many others, from approaching her work with any serious attention. A close reading of her work revealed that her actual work, both in diversity of subject matter and range of poetic craft, did not correspond to the reductive image many of us had held.

Incredulous about the disparity between the actual import of her work and its perception, and eager to test if, indeed, the misconception was as widespread as I had imagined, I printed out her poems on various subjects, representing an accurate spectrum of her



oeuvre, and began several rounds of questioning in my circles.

In a telling verdict, most would attribute the verses to male poets. The only poems that people would readily identify with Perveen Shakir were the few verses, mostly romantic, popularised by repetition in the media and regurgitated ad nauseam through Facebook memes.

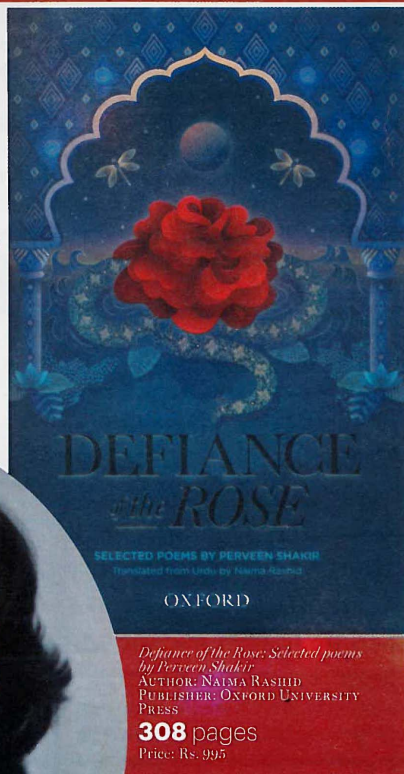
For many of the poems included in the translated volume, *Defiance of the Rose*, most people were openly dis-

missive when told who the poet was. Unanimously, they found the mood too bleak, brazen and dark for the image they had of her.

Clearly, that image needed to be adjusted. A work of translation can revisit an original in a new light, and reignite a conversation that got lost in the folds of time.

For me, Perveen Shakir represents the essence of a modern woman who, as far back as the '80s, modelled a life according to her values and ambitions. She was divorced, disowned by her own family, and along with her son, lived with a friend until her demise in a car accident.

As a single mother, she walked the tightrope of balancing personal responsibilities with professional ambitions, of which she had a rich and ever-growing roster. Boldly, she navigated the inhospitable terrains of bureaucra-



Defiance of the Rose: Selected poems by Perveen Shakir
AUTHOR: NAIMA RASHID
PUBLISHER: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
308 pages
Price: Rs. 995

cy as well as the poetic world, both bastions of male privilege.

Why was it then that this fire, this struggle, is almost completely absent from popular memory, that she is, so frequently and frustratingly, remembered as a swooning romantic?

Clearly, her work has a character that does not appeal directly to the bra-burning feminism of the twenty-first century. Her shade of feminism is not writ in the black and white language of denial or refusal, but in the grey of vulnerability, in a zone where, while her actions are a testimony to her convictions, a hint of longing or a shade of frailty can show up una-

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bashed, and she is brave enough to own it. This vulnerability, so often derided, takes nothing away from her strength as a woman, it simply makes her more human and more endearing.

In 'Working Woman,' she hints at this duality. Talking of the pride she takes in her independence, she says how she is grounded in her person and her work, on top of her game professionally,

*Yet, sometimes, when a strong wind blows,
this ageless vine sprawling
inside the breadth of my being,
around a tree's sturdy trunk,
wants to wrap its arms.*

Conversely, a wistfulness for other horizons, can also show up in a moment of matrimonial bliss. We see a glimpse of that in 'Ransom.'

*Sitting in the scarlet shade
of the pomegranate tree,
making coffee --*

*I like it too
but when I'm doing it,
my lashes downward cast,
the shade they hide from you
is much darker
than the one I'm sitting in.*

Much of her work where the stunning diversity of her range of style and subject lies, while well known in literary circles, was never popularised in mainstream.

As an example, a whole suite of portraits, insightful cross-sections of the times she lived in, establish her as a skilled sculptor of the portrait in verse.

Take the dark, Dickensian portrait of a steel mills worker. Stroke by stroke, she colours in the shades slowly, drawing up a person in flesh, before sharply snapping the pieces of the puzzle together in a final irony.

He does not not know, though,
that in full consciousness,
he has signed a contract of death,
for his life is the engine
that powers the beast.

You know that moment in which the decision is made. It is unmistakable. You have looked into a story; the story has looked back at you. Its raw heart lies bare before you. You can look past the curtain of words into the worlds beyond.

It starts as a quiet conviction, and builds up to a raging compulsion that sears its way through your pen in a second retelling.

The truth is – you don't choose the work you translate, the work chooses you. ■