

## PERVEEN SHAKIR

بھٹ

بھیڑیے کے آنے سے  
ایک دو گھڑی پہلے  
ایک سناتی ہو  
بن میں پھیل جاتی ہے

آج میرے گھر میں بھی  
میری تیسری جس نے  
کوئی بات دیجھی ہے  
اتنی دیر میں 'میں نے  
تیسری کہ چوتھی بار  
گھر کے کونے کونے میں  
پھر گلاب چھڑکا ہے

پھر گلاب کی ڈھالیں  
کیا مجھے بچالیں گی؟

## Bhatt

Bheriye ke aane se  
ek do ghari pehle  
ek sansanaati bu  
ban mein phail jaati hai

Aaj mere ghar mein bhi  
Meri teesri his ne  
Koyi baat dekhi hai

Itni deir main, main ne  
Teesri ke chauthee baar  
Ghar ke konay konay mein  
Phir gulaab chirkaa hai

Phir gulaab ki dhaalein  
Kya mujhay bacha lain gi?

## When the Wolves Come

Moments before  
the wolves come,  
a sharp stench  
shoots through the woods

Today, in my house too,  
my sixth sense has picked  
a similar stench

In this short time alone,  
three of four times already,  
every corner of the house  
with rose petals I have strewn

These shields of roses,  
will they save me  
when the wolves come?

## LULL: TRANSLATING SILENCE

Naima Rashid *reconsiders feminine strength and defiance in the work of Urdu poet Perveen Shakir through a close reading of her poem 'Bhatt'*

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COMPARED TO OTHER FEMALE POETS WRITING IN URDU, Perveen Shakir (1952-1994) was more of a people's poet. She enjoys a popularity that is quite distinct. Her first book, *Khushboo* (Fragrance), published in 1976, became a bestseller with the first edition selling out six months after its release. Both as a poet and in her professional life as a civil servant and educator, she was prominent due to her accomplishments and often in the public eye. For her contributions in poetry, she was awarded the most coveted literary honours in South Asia including the Faiz Ahmed Faiz International Award for Poetry in India and the President's Pride of Performance Award for Literature in Pakistan, among many others.

She was a Fulbright scholar at Hartford College, Connecticut, USA, and recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Fellowship at John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She represented Pakistan as part of writers' delegations invited to China in 1987 and Dhaka in 1989, for the first of which she was selected by the

Government of Pakistan. She competed for popular programs on radio and television, and also wrote a long-running column for the Urdu daily, *Jang*, which was compiled and posthumously published in book form as *Gosha-e-Chasham* (The Corner of The Eye), in 2000. It wouldn't be wrong to say that her striking beauty also had something to do with her literary celebrity; in addition to being a well-known poet, she is a well-known face.

Her meteoric early success, the professional accomplishments which kept her in the limelight, and her tragic death in a car accident make the story of her personal life as much a part of collective memory as her poems. Rarely is her name mentioned without reference to her biography being as prominent as her poetry itself. The accolades did not stop after her death. She continued to be awarded prizes posthumously. In 2013, Pakistan Post Office issued a commemorative postage stamp to honour the poet on her 19<sup>th</sup> death anniversary. On 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2019—what would have been her 67<sup>th</sup> birthday—Google honoured her with a doodle representing an illustration of one of her verses.

Considered among the most important modern Urdu poets, her experiments with language and subject matter opened up new possibilities and tangents in Urdu language and poetry, expanding its scope. In this, Shakir has powerful precedents among her contemporaries, trailblazers such as Fehmida Riaz (1946-2018), Kishwar Naheed (1940-present), and Sara Shagufta (1954-1984), each of whom pushed the boundaries of what Urdu poetry meant, and left their unique mark on it. Continuing this tradition, in a style that was refreshingly bold, experimental, and accessible, Shakir brought to Urdu poetry a tone that was conversational, frank, and outrightly girlish at times ('Why should I call him first?/He knows just as well—/last evening/was the season's first shower.' 'Tantrum'). Often, the language she used was a hybrid of Urdu and English, the idiom of choice of an urban elite in Pakistan. In terms of subject matter, she brought to Urdu poetry an exploration of the whole range of feminine experience, from romance to the challenges of navigating a patriarchal society in different roles of poet, mother, and civil servant.

During her life and after her death, Shakir's work has been translated many times, both in India and Pakistan. Among her translators are Alamgir Hashmi, C.M. Naim, Baidar Bakht, Leslie Lavigne, Rehan Qayoom, and Mahmudul Hasani. Translations of her work published in book form include the joint translation by Baidar Bakht and Leslie Lavigne, *Talking to Oneself*, which was completed in close collaboration with the poet during her lifetime. It was published in 1995, a year after her death, by Lafzlog Publications, the publishing imprint for Shakir's work which is now run by the Perveen Shakir Trust. Another selection of her works in translation, *After Parveen Shakir*, was self-published in 2011 by Rehan Qayoom, a UK-based poet.

Ironically, in popular memory, Shakir's reputation became trapped by the phenomenal success of her first work, *Khushboo* (Fragrance), which comprised mostly romantic poems. Commemorative tributes published in national dailies every year on her birth and death anniversaries remember her mostly as a romantic (little 'r') poet, reinforcing a connection between her femininity and romanticism. In reality, her work goes beyond that. Showing this diversity and filling gaps in popular remembrance of

her work was the overt premise for my translation of her selected verses, *Defiance of the Rose* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

This femininity has also been used to problematise her place among the feminists of Urdu poetry in the established canon. *We Sinful Women* (The Women's Press Limited, 1991), an anthology of work by Urdu feminist poets, compiled by Rukhsana Ahmed, a UK-based critic, can safely be cited as the best-known available reference on the subject in English. Ahmed states that the premise of her selection was 'poems which had a content of feminist struggle and political awareness.' She is aware of the limitations of this premise. 'I knew this would not always yield the best of a poet's work, and that I would have to exclude Perveen Shakir and Ada Jafri, two well-known and highly regarded women poets.' The reasons for excluding Perveen Shakir include her 'acceptance of sexist values and the absence of a political context', because of which her writing was declared 'distinctively un-feminist'.

A problem with this approach is that while it sets out to be representative of the 'modern and dynamic' in Urdu poetry which could 'establish its relevance for the nineties', the model it references is the Progressive Writers' Association of the forties and measures political and feminist engagement as manifesting in events, forms, and spaces which feel limited and dated today. The criteria for selection also led to some discrepancies of which Ahmed herself is keenly aware. Poems by Ishrat Aafreen and Neelma Sarwar were included, who, at the time of publication of Ahmed's anthology, had published a single volume of verse each. By measure of poetic output and stature alone, Perveen Shakir and Ada Jafri, who did not make the cut, were poets of significantly greater impact and stature. The criteria seems narrowly focused on a couple of criteria as slippery as they are stringent, while missing the larger, holistic picture.

The greater issue here is not the limitations of this one anthology, but the dearth of work and scholarship on the subject available in English since. The fact that what we have as our most 'modern and dynamic' representation of Urdu feminist poetry dates back to 1991 says a lot, which is why a forthcoming work of scholarship on the subject, *Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Pakistani Urdu Writing* (Anthem Press, 2021) by Amina Yaqin, a globally recognized scholar on Pakistan and its diaspora and founding Chair of the Centre for the Study of Pakistan at SOAS, will be particularly welcome.

In March 2020, almost three decades later an essay published in *Words Without Borders*, 'Urdu Feminist Writing: New Approaches', picks up the conversation on Urdu feminist writing. The essay, jointly authored by six academics, Asad Alvi, Amna Chaudhry, Mehak Khan, Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, Geeta Patel, and Haider Shahbaz, is available to read in full online. Setting out to celebrate 'multiple, non-canonical perspectives', it takes issue with the dated binaries ('active/inactive', 'political/apolitical', 'feminine/masculine') of Ahmed's logic which decides who is a feminist and who is not based on parameters which themselves need to be re-evaluated and re-examined responsibly in keeping with the times.

When planning the first edition for my translation, it was a conscious decision to avoid the fatigue of academic debates which are mostly in conversation with (and almost never in agreement with) each other rather than the reader. I was confident

that if we all could keep quiet, the poems could do the talking on their own without the tyranny of a framework for perception coming in the way. I wanted to curate a selection that broke away from the ‘poetess of fragrance’ narrative dominant in the mainstream which presents Shakir in a subdued light.

How do you pick a poem that captures the essence of a person and their work? I was looking for an image, a title that captured her beauty and femininity as a strength without the lurking shadows of ‘isms’, jargon and entrenched (read expired) beliefs tainting the view. A poem that naturally suggested itself was ‘Bhatt’ (Den/Lair) from her collection *Khud Kalam* (Talking to Oneself), published in 1990. The volume is dedicated to her son, Murad, and is a reckoning of her experience as a mother, among other things. The poem has the structure of a tall, slim column. With a sustained syllabic weight of 6-7 per line, it reads like silence sculpted, a monument in bated breath.

The translator must first unspool the meaning of the original, and after a pause, weave it back again in the language being translated into, anchoring the process in the felt meaning of the original rather than the words. Translation is an act of the body and bones, not an unscrambling and rearrangement of fragments in the mind. One translates from the place of what lingers after the poem has been read several times and its meaning absorbed. I was guided by subliminal cues I had picked up in my reading of the chilling original, how its weighted consonants (*‘bhatt’*, *‘dhaalain’*, *‘bheriye’*) signaled danger, almost the feel of predator’s paws advancing silently, how its fluid central column of lucid sentences hid the tense reckoning of a woman frozen in the fight or flight instinct. This woman is alert. She has sensed a dreaded yet familiar beast at the threshold, a beast that was always present in close quarters, sometimes barely disguised, other times its fangs laid bare.

A poem is not read in isolation, but as part of a continuum, a larger whole. It is at once a unit complete unto itself and a chord in a larger symphony, in conversation with the other curated pieces. The translator is aware of a current of motifs and meaning that goes back and forth between the single unit of a poem and the larger field of the complete oeuvre. I knew from my knowledge of her oeuvre that the notion of habitat and the beast at the door were both fluid; both changed forms. What did not change was the conflict, the encounter, essence of woman pitted against essence of beast.

This shape-shifting beast isn’t an ‘other’, isn’t another species. It is man himself when his inner demons are laid bare and he sheds the salvaging cloak of civility, transgressing our shared codes of humanity. Wild habitats (caves, lairs, forests) punctuate Shakir’s work as leitmotifs, places where nature is untamed and the thickets hide dark secrets. The law of the jungle prevails here; creatures of stealth are in close quarters. When the insidiousness of their intent becomes apparent, they change form variously—sometimes, they morph into churails, ‘their feet suddenly vanish(ing)’; the forest floor is ‘teeming with scorpions’, a house hollowed to its core by termites is broken to rubble, leaving her exposed to wolves.

The forest is always busy. There are traps and deception everywhere. Its tangled network of alliances built on selfishness and vested interest oust her, make a stranger of her. There is always a hum of malicious whispering, a chorus of conspiracy. And yet,

this is where she must live. The jangal is a habitat. Danger is a premise, not a revelation. I was also mindful of the sharpness with which the poem evoked and played upon the senses—the visual contrast between the red of the rose and grey of wolf-hide, the textural conflict between the velvety sheen of one and the coarse gruffness of the other, the sense of smell, the odour of wolf, the stench of danger, and the overwhelming, almost sickening sweetness of petals strewn. Most importantly, the measured silence, the carefully considered pauses and the sustained metre in the poem.

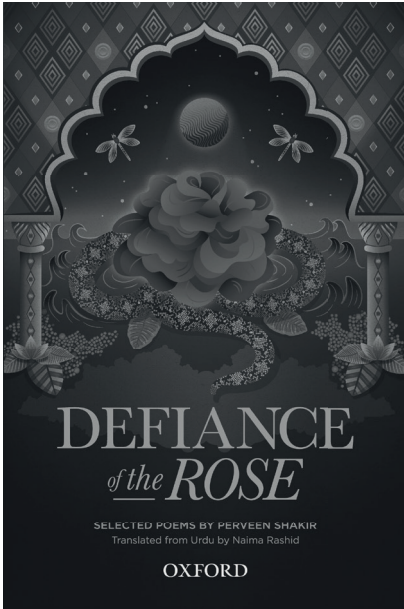
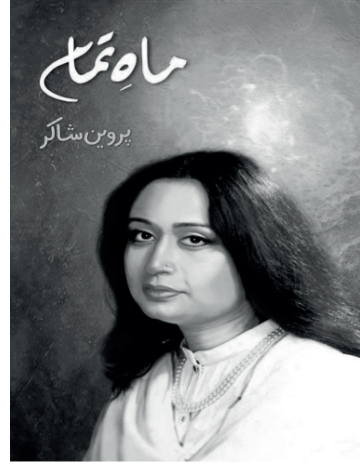
When translating a poem, one translates with an ear to the music of what is said, but equally the cadence of silence which completes the tune. The pause, the unsaid, is part of the meaning. I wanted to retain the sustained lull in the poem, its vortex of deep stillness. This stillness is neutral. It could mean reflection. It could mean panic. It could mean calm. It could mean preparedness. The original does not suggest a verdict; it closes with an open-ended question, betraying only the knowledge that this has happened before and will happen again. The translation had to recreate this silence and the cadence of the rhythm, and also retain the way the question at the end hangs in the air, its leaden weight thrown out without apology or alarm.

The last two lines in the original translate as ‘These shields of roses, / will they save me again / then / once more?’ In reading, this translation loses the effect of difficulty (a slowness in reading) in the original ‘Phir gulaab ki dhalain, / kya mujhey bacha lain gi?’. It becomes too glib, too smooth; it loses a dimension. A solution was to add a third line, evoking again the image of the wolves, and bringing the poem full-circle with the title. The word ‘phir’ translates as ‘then’, ‘so’, ‘once more’, or ‘again’. It suggests repetition, iteration. The line ‘when the wolves come’ does the same, while also slowing the reading the way the sounds in the original do, giving the question room to haunt us.

Translation is ekphrasis. Perhaps, all art is. A contrast between the rose and the wolf sits at the heart of the poem. The use of rose in the original is multi-layered and rooted in a cultural understanding of the associations it evokes. In the first instance, the form of the rose is liquid; she is spraying rose water after smelling the stench of wolves on the prowl. Spraying rose water is a purifying ritual. There is the suggestion to counter the stench of the wolf with the fragrance of rose essence. In the last verse, the rose morphs into a protective shield. While this can be understood as metaphorical, it forcefully suggests the convex of petal as shield. It also reconfigures fragility, beauty, and femininity as a quiet strength that can stand its ground with grace and poise. It is soft and feminine at the core, but knows instinctively how to turn to armour in the heat of the moment.

In Pakistan, rose petals are strewn over graves in mausoleums and graveyards as a symbol of devotion. The smell of rose petals is at once the scent of death and the scent of celebration. New graves, while still mounds of earth, are covered with rose petals. Garlands of roses are worn as congratulatory or welcoming tokens; airport floors are often littered with petals in welcome. Wedding floors, and bridal beds are covered with these. There is another layer to the use of rose which complicates the translation choices. In her larger oeuvre, the poet refers to herself as a rose. The symbol of the rose in the poem merges with the poet’s person; the shields she refers to for defending herself against the wolves, are not an extraneous object, but inner strength itself—a

sharpened instinct, a personal boundary strengthened. In parallel, the red has also begun to evoke a premonition of spilled blood, not stated in the poem, but something we are beginning to see in our mind's eye by the time the poem draws to a close.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Perveen Shakir, the author pictured on the cover of her book *Mah e Tamam* (Jahangir Book Depot, 2002), and the cover of Naima Rashi'd translated selection, *Defiance of the Rose* (University of Oxford Press, 2019).

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