

## Selections from the Poetry of Kishwar Naheed

Translated by Mahwash Shoaib

### Translator's Note

Kishwar Naheed (b. 1940) is one of the foremost Urdu poets in Pakistan. Known for her activism both on and off the page, she is a pioneer in many respects: one of the first women poets to be published extensively, she is also a practitioner of free verse and prose poetry, newer additions to the metered and rhymed traditions of Urdu poetry.

I have translated some poems from Naheed's 1998 collection *Mein Pehley Janam mei Raat thi / In My First Life I was Night* and *Sokhta Samani-e-Dil / Composition of a Scorched Heart*, published in 2002. What is astonishing about these poems is how frighteningly prescient Naheed has been about the present debacle Pakistan finds itself in and to which the headlines of the past few weeks also bear testimony. These are poems written against neo-imperialism, the imbalance between the social classes in Pakistan, the failure of the Pakistani state to provide justice, the draconian rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the US invasion of Afghanistan. What rings clear in all of Naheed's poetry is the call to equality and undeniable rights for everyone – especially women, as they become the subject of her poetry repeatedly. Her quote of a popular verse from the poet Mohsin Bhopali (1932-2007) at the end of "Ants Consume the Elephant" demonstrates Naheed's belief that it is impossible to stop someone from asking questions, and that possibility of hope is a much-needed poultice Naheed has supplied through her poetry and borne the responsibility for in her literary career spanning more than four decades.

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*Mein Pehley Janam mei Raat thi / In My First Life I was Night* by  
Kishwar Naheed (1998)

*The Poem that Doesn't Melt in Europe / Europe mei na Pighalney Wali Nazm*

I was once sorrow, epitome of sorrow  
before seeing  
the crying sobbing women of Bosnia.

I was once woman  
before seeing  
mad from incessant crying, unclothed  
limp, senseless, glassy-eyed women.

I was once hunger  
before seeing  
humanity in Rwanda eating its own excrement  
in Somalia shredding the hide of camels.

I was once voice  
before seeing  
the community of nations closing its eyes  
like bats  
and even death trembling at this scene.  
Darkness, helplessness and barbarity all have their own stench  
This stench is not for those nations  
waiting  
for the end of the last man who asks for his rights. (23-24)

*My Nation, Listen to My Entreaty / Aey Meri Qom! Meri Binti Sun!*

My country came into being through a law,  
the law of the British  
British – whichever line they drew  
and gave it the name of two countries,  
we just accepted it.

Our nation accepts every thing and every person  
This nation accepted tyrants  
it accepted lackeys, accepted impostors  
If it did not accept,  
it did not accept maulvis  
it did not accept vampires and wolves,  
did not accept declarations and fatwas.

O my nation  
Your ancestors also had not accepted them  
Your courts also had not defended them  
Your flag also had not worn their amulets.  
O my nation,  
beware of those people  
saluting them  
defending them  
wearing their amulets.

They hate woman,  
as if they hate their own mother and their own daughter  
In every shape of woman they see lust  
and decorate their dreams as such  
May any disaster fall upon the world,  
they will not speak  
May all the officers of all the country  
become corrupt, drunk, venal,  
they will not speak  
On each and every step throats are slit,  
people are bought and sold,  
they will not speak.  
Yes, but if any woman emerges with a banner in hand –  
instantly they will speak  
instantly delete her from the sphere of Islam,  
from every reward of life.

O my nation!  
Seek shelter from these merchants of Islam  
Else in the harems of tribal leaders and landlords  
our futures will be nurtured

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These people will not issue fatwas against them  
And when our future children  
won't be able to tell the names of their father  
then even flocks of swallows will not come to their help. (20-22)

*A Solemn Conversation with the Taliban / Taliban se Qibla-ru Guftagu*

Those who were frightened even of girls  
Those even averse to knowledge,  
they speak of the great Lord  
He who commands of knowledge  
Unrelated to His command,  
they announce these declarations:

That no book be in any hand  
Nor a pen between fingers  
No place remain for writing a name  
That women become nameless

Those who were even frightened of girls  
announce in every city:  
That the budding contours of a young girl  
be veiled  
That to the query of every heart  
answer this –  
There is no need  
that these girls  
soar like birds  
There's also no need  
that these girls  
head to any schools, any offices  
If there be some blazing beauty, some one pious  
then only within the walls  
is her place  
This is the Decree  
This Written.

Those who were frightened even of girls

they are here, somewhere nearby –  
See them, know them  
Expect anything from them  
in the fallen city  
Keep courage, believe this  
that those who were frightened even of girls  
what pygmies they are  
Announce in every city:  
Keep courage, believe this  
That those who were frightened even by girls  
they are such pygmies. (88-90)

*Unexpected Balance / Gher-Mutawaqa Tarazoo*

I saw  
no wood and no material,  
yet a bridge had been built on the boats of compromise  
The crossers had crossed  
and the fallers had fallen too

I saw  
no hand and no staff,  
yet in a few seconds the scales had become weightless  
Only walls were left,  
the turban had become worthless

I saw  
no one to pull the trigger and no gun,  
yet in bunkers and moats  
instead of the pounding of war-drums and banners  
a jingling was sounding  
Out of toy guns too  
golden shimmering pages were issuing

I saw  
words even unclothed were not crestfallen  
they didn't even ask for shrouds

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Only for a needle  
to remove the connection of words and lips (31-32)

*Provisional Kingship / Aboori Shahwar*

If you had to speak,  
you should have told some new story  
Apart from convention, you should have expressed the world's conditions.  
What is this? Those same pharaoh's deeds  
you also acquired  
You too with the affirmation of tyranny  
ask from us the allusion of the spectacle of acceptance.  
If nothing else, ask for the bond of tolerance.

We were distressed, sorrowful  
but still were silent:  
We thought the messiah's embodiment isn't complete yet.  
Again from behind some roof the sun will rise  
that it will not give a chance to the faceless trickster to hide  
It will also be herald to we who were punished for desire.  
You are an earthling  
You tell a story but  
the debts of madness are the same  
the words of reproach the same  
in dreambowl, the portent of interpretation also same  
the story of coming hidden at nights also same  
all false hopes same  
all coquettries also same.  
If you had to speak,  
you should have told some new story. (62-63)

*Dream Journey / Khwab mei Safar*

The land changed, the taste of breezes changed  
but the face didn't change:  
this woman is my face.  
This woman has played with me

in the garden burning from the sun  
This woman, bathing in the shower of grief  
smiling even when wearing all the wrinkles of age  
and relating her sorrows to the wind  
distributing joys among all,  
seems like dew.

I know that her friend  
is a window in her house  
where she has saved  
all the fragrances, all the encounters of her spent life.  
All those wrinkles that age has written on her face  
landing in that window, all are dissolved.  
That girl emerges afresh  
who has worn the necklace of the pearls of desire.

(74-75)

*Accountability / Ehtasaab*

Again with the bugle sounding  
now the slaughterhouse is being adorned.  
It is calling forward  
taking name of every one.  
The charge sheet is clean  
but the ink is fresh  
Here, write with pen on it:  
You are guilty, this is proved.

\*

In the city is this proclamation:  
Those who are the sons of the land  
if they turn crooked,  
they will receive immunity  
Pawn justice  
and they will receive official loans.

\*

Crucifixes are asking,  
Where shall we plead

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Whom shall we call witness  
We were draped with necks  
whose blood was unwarranted  
Why their lips were sealed  
this also was obvious to us.

\*

Spring is coming again  
The slaughterhouse is being decorated  
Footfalls are mounting  
The tones of the  
clean crime sheet are changing.  
The color of the eyes  
of the judges is also changing.  
Here, take the pen and write: Now even  
you are guilty, this is proved! (91-92)

*Sokhta Samani-e-Dil/ Composition of a Scorched Heart* by Kishwar  
Naheed (2002)

*Fulfillment of Borrowed Joys / Mangi hui Khushion ki Tabeer*

After the setting of the sun  
every color loses its existence  
When I come to the kitchen  
to take care of everyday things  
then all the colors of my being sink  
Hands wrapped  
in gloves made of cottonwool and plastic  
start moving like those of jokers  
All the stages from childhood to old age are completed  
but the movement of jokers' hands hasn't changed  
Those who built the pyramids  
or transposed the caves of Ajanta into the Buddha's statues,  
were they all jokers like me?



I wish those artists could be saved too,  
love could be saved too (43)

*Kandahar Dirge / Noha-e-Kandahar*

We are supposed to cry for those who die  
I have seen tens of thousands  
die with my own eyes  
I have also seen them turn young  
I have also seen that their  
fragile shoulders have been prepared for firing bullets  
by placing dreams of paradise and houris on them  
They kept listening to everything and kept weaving dreams  
and then started walking towards that desert  
where those who bury in the wall of peace,  
in exchange for their white skins and the price of the dollar  
leaving them unburied,  
on tv screens  
were telling the stories of their victory  
I did not cry for those who had died  
I also did not side with the white beasts –  
to which tribe do I belong!  
Am I the vegetation of the rubbish heap  
that cannot differentiate between begging and hunger?  
The words I write are also like the particles of sand  
that neither build a wall nor a door  
All around me are the slogans of war  
and the statue of peace has been demolished like that of Bamiyan  
I am crying now for those left alive  
who are standing holding the shadows of desolation:  
these people know the name of the enemy  
but turn mute looking at a dollar bill (59-60)

*To Which Heaven Are We Rushing / Hum Kaun si Jannat ki Simt Rawan hein*

A nation that has neither grass for eating  
nor bread,

a street for walking  
nor vehicle,  
that has freedom to live  
nor sanctuary from death  
A nation where people no longer have homes,  
there are no more people to talk to  
Whose children receive bombs for breakfast  
and ceaseless bombing for lullabies,  
death defines the boundaries of that country  
You might remember  
This nation had a vast history  
such brave young men  
and rosy-cheeked women,  
the wind too sidestepped  
the turbans on the heads of the men  
The rosy-cheeked faces of this nation were enshrouded in sand  
fields made barren  
girls imprisoned in veils  
and guns placed in children's hands  
I feel  
that there is a lesson for us in this whole story:  
we who became the friends of the bombers  
we who became the enemies of Taliban,  
to which heaven are we rushing  
Tomorrow when no one will buy our crops  
the markets for the cotton  
spun by our women dry up  
when our very own will thirst for our blood,  
then whose friend  
and whose enemy will we be  
The bread glued to your mouth  
and the bread that someone throws in front of you,  
tomorrow what bread will you get  
tomorrow which city remain  
The moment when there is no difference between friend and enemy  
when hope avoids seeing its face in the mirror  
dangling in that state –  
tomorrow what person will remain  
tomorrow which city remain

(61-63)

*Poets and Palestine / Shair aur Phalasteen*

Faiz had pacified the children of Bethlehem  
singing them lullabies  
Samih al-Qasim, in the hope  
of achieving the land of Palestine,  
kept writing poems and laughing  
Fadwa Tuqan, even in the state of suffocation  
boldly confronting the sun  
kept saying that I  
'will not sell its love'  
Muin Bseiso had seen  
the shadows of army boots on the words of poetry  
Tawfiq Ziad had not  
accepted even the tenth part of the sweetness of hopes  
Mahmoud Darwish could not be stopped from writing  
Whose poem,  
a torn paper, was in his hands  
under his feet was no such land  
which he could call his own in dying  
I, Naheed, in which courtyard  
should sing someone a lullaby  
that my children, in losing their lives in suicide attacks,  
are alive and laughing (75-76)

*Chant-Song of the Twenty-first Century / Ikeeswin Sadi ka Zamzama*

I question  
a human like me  
when will you give me this dignity  
when will you not be offended  
on my walking alongside  
on my being a person  
on my dreaming,  
thinking, on laughing

I question  
I talk with you

when there will be dialogue  
views are exchanged  
in golden dawns  
will be the nectar of conversation,  
in all the affairs of the house  
will be harmony of equality

I answer myself  
I talk with you  
This century that is gone  
was yours  
This century that will come  
is ours  
You too are a part of us,  
yet are unaware of this  
that all grievances want  
honor of eloquence  
That all devotions want  
affectionate reception  
If you accept this  
if you know this  
then the moon too will bowing say  
this century that will come  
is ours  
It is ours!

(83-84)

*To the Elected Women Counselors / Khawatin Muntakhib Counselors ke Nam*

Placing an empty bowl in my hand  
they all say  
ask for what you desire:  
bread, meat  
respect, rank  
royal morsels of sovereignty  
doors opening to gardens.  
I had also thought  
that, outside of dreams,  
I will be happy

to make every daughter of my country  
the candle lighting  
the threshold of respect and purity  
I will give my sons  
the amulet of self-respect  
so no government to other countries  
goes begging for loans  
if it does, then to no avail.  
Placing the empty bowl of sovereignty in my hand  
they all laugh and say:  
who told you, bitten by words, to come to this town  
here the boat of the disparity between saying and doing will run the same  
the desert of time remain the same.  
When will the destination of understanding arrive  
When will the empty bowl fill with knowledge  
When will the woman out of the cage  
learning to fly say to you:  
the distance fixed between you and me  
for centuries,  
I have cut the rope of this distance.  
I am wearing  
all the seasons of rain and time  
Come out of the garden of loafing now  
Come mend the flawed deeds  
Accompany me  
The sunlight is pure  
and now the plaque bearing my name is in every alley. (93-95)

*Ants Consume the Elephant / Choontian Hathi Kha jati hein*

On whom should I write a poem now  
That widow  
who without justice  
under the shadow of spears and guns  
besides the grave  
is seeing her beloved's face

On whom should I write a poem now  
That girl  
who cannot marry  
of her own accord  
and those who point fingers,  
her own blood,  
are petitioners of justice  
That darling  
for daring to express her own will  
is wandering between dungeons  
and sees ahead the person who had reared her  
in the form of an assassin

On whom should I write a poem now  
The city of Kosovo  
where a mother  
has found all her six beloved children  
in the same grave  
Or should I go see in Albania  
in unknown faces  
the same  
crying, lamenting motherhood

Weak colors fade  
but the color of a mother's sorrow stays fresh  
who will remove it  
who will forget it

On whom should I write a poem now  
My seven year old girl  
is sitting in the imperial scales of the masters:  
Wear a chaddar  
Laughing, talking, dancing, singing  
all are lewd  
Even their reflections  
should not gain ground inside the thresholds,  
else hell on this earth  
a brother's honor will compose

On whom should I write a poem now  
On myself  
That would be a narrative  
of finding the flag and the veil  
It will be an elegy  
of bedimming bright eyes  
The sunlight is luminous in the fields –  
walking, planting harvests in it  
bringing water from miles,  
my daughter  
laughing, talking, dancing, singing  
lighting the lamps placed in the arch of rumination  
says to the whole world  
I will speak, I will sing  
'Try if you can, stop  
the drops of the first rain!'

(102-105)