POEMS



Noshi Gillani

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Contents

Introduction	6
The breeze rewrites	9
Can someone bring me my entire being?	11
You know only dreams	13
Insight	13
A change of season	13
This prisoner breathes	15
I say nothing anywhere	17
To catch butterflies	19
The flower is torn at the heart	21
Please bring a token home from each journey	23
Last conversation with the sky	25
The wind, too, can change direction	27
Kept on compromising on life	29
How hard it is to manage life	31
There was a time when I loved alone	33
There was a heart that burnt out: light	35

Introduction

Noshi Gillani, who was born in 1964 in Bahwalpur in the South Punjab, is one of the leading Urdu poets of Pakistan. After she married in 1994, she left her seven-year academic career in Pakistan and migrated to the USA, where she is now an important figure among poets of the Pakistani diaspora.

Her poetry collections published in Pakistan include Mohabatain Jub Shumar Kurna (When You Count Affections, 1993), Udas Honay Kay Din Naheen (These Are Not the Days of Sadness, 1997), Pehla Lafz Mohabat Likha (The First Word of Love, 2003), and selected poems: Ay Meeray Shureek-E-Risal-E-Jaan, Hum Tera Intezaar Kurtay Rahey (O My Beloved, I Kept Waiting for You, 2008).

Poetry is of overwhelming importance in Pakistani society, and Urdu poetry in particular reminds us of our country's deep cultural ties with the pre-colonial and Indo-Persian heritage of South Asia. Urdu was the court language of the Mughals and became the main choice of male *shairs* (poets). The historic changes that took place in South Asia towards the end of the colonial era (culminating in the partition of India in 1947) brought with them the appearance of a number of female poets, including the feminist Kishwar Naheed (born in 1940) and her contemporary Fahmida Riaz (born in 1946), both of whom have been translated into English and had their work published in the UK.

Noshi is a member of a younger generation of female poets. However, what distinguishes her from her contemporaries is her experience of living in exile in the US, an experience that has had a notable impact on the quest for identity that informs a significant number of her poems. In addition, living through diaspora has increased the complexity of her poems, both reinforcing her sense of female identity in her rebellion against the repression creative writers endure within Pakistani society and keeping her sense of self intact through the processes of migration and settlement in the West. These ideas form the subject of many of her poems, such as 'This Prisoner Breathes', 'Kept Compromising in Life' and 'I Say Nothing Anywhere'. Related to this theme of women struggling against social taboos are images that exemplify her freedom metaphorically; the poet personifies herself in many of her poems as a butterfly ('To catch butterflies . . .'), the breeze ('The breeze rewrites'), or light ('There was a heart that burnt out: light'). Her use of metaphor is also associated with the inspiration Noshi derives from Sufism, an example of which is reflected in poems that deal with journeys through deserts ('Can someone bring me my entire being?', 'This prisoner breathes'). The desert symbol is borrowed directly from the Sufi tradition, illuminating the poet's inner journey towards self-identification and her real life journey from the East to the West.

Within the South Asian context the significance of the oral nature of poetry is kept alive through Mushairas. These are events, usually well attended, in which the poet recites or sings her poems, directly stimulating a profound emotional reaction in the audience, who themselves participate in the recital through their verbal responses to the poet. This interaction between the poet and audience creates an impact which is unimaginable through simply reading the poems in a book. Mushairas continue to be a vital part of poetry in Urdu. Many people can't afford to buy poetry books and so they treasure the experience of directly engaging with the poet. And often their passion for poetry encourages them to memorise these poems by heart. Noshi's public performances articulate the emotions of her poetry far more intensely than simply reading her poems either in the original or in translation. The Poetry Translation Centre's World Poets' Tour of 2008 is therefore a rare opportunity for the lovers of Urdu shairi (poetry) in Britain. The tour offers them a unique chance to share the sentiments of a modern Pakistani woman, who specializes in encapsulating her delicate emotions and intricate life in a handful of heartbreaking lines, as for instance in this couplet:

> You know only dreams We know the danger of dreams.

And, in a brief poem titled, 'Insight' she writes:

I have a feeling That wherever I glance There will be disaster.

NUKHBAH LANGAH

اختيار

THE BREEZE REWRITES

Now that the breeze has learnt to write She can choose to rewrite autumn as spring To redefine spring as waiting

Now that the breeze has learnt to write She can transform the urge to travel into a curse And curse those sticking to a faithful path

Now that the breeze has learnt to write Coming together is described as moving apart Love, portrayed as a weakness A tree, something that cannot give shade

Now the breeze can extinguish our lanterns Give credence to dusk, dismiss unreliable dawn

Oh all you who teach the breeze to write! Now that the breeze has learnt to write

Can someone bring me my entire being? My arms, my eyes, my face?

I am a river flowing into the wrong sea If only someone could restore me to the desert

Life goes on but I want no more from it Than my childhood, my firefly, my doll

My vision does not admit this new season Take me back to my old dream

Of finding one face among the many in my city Whose eyes can read deep into me

My life has been a boat in a whirlpool for so long O god, please let it sink or drift back to the desert

كشف

You know only dreams We know the danger of dreams

INSIGHT

I have a feeling That wherever I glance There will be disaster

A CHANGE OF SEASON

A change of season Exposes something Hidden in her fear: A way across that island Lit by the pain in her eyes

THIS PRISONER BREATHES

I am trapped in a jungle of voices In which I cannot spread my wings Even so, you insist that I take flight You will not set me free And are so offended by my point of view That you stitch my eyelashes closed You insist I must explain the weather Terrorise my feet with echoes of chains You say that my desire to be free Is too much for your precious jungle Yet you set fire to the boat carrying my feelings Surround this sea of feeling with desert sand But listen! Whatever happens . . . Suffocation, torture, desert or jungle This prisoner breathes

I say nothing anywhere, I am silent While you, as if my lord, order me silent

The story has something to say But its characters are silent

Blame rains down Yet, like a stone, I am silent

Till now the killer has been quite safe Because the walls and doors are silent

People demand the killer's whereabouts But the village guards are silent.

The same chained evening, same time of year But why this time is everyone silent?

'TO CATCH BUTTERFLIES'

I once thought it easy To seize fragrance To capture the evenings of monsoon While sitting at home To clutch starlight in my hand

I once thought it easy To seize fragrance To light the flower that is my courtyard With the whisper of fireflies To hold his memory in my dreaming eyes Like roses cast upon a lake I had thought it easy . . .

How I fooled myself! How could it happen? 'To catch butterflies, you have to go far enough.'

ہم سے قاتل کے خال و خد پوچھو ہم نے مقتل میں شب گزاری ہے

The flower is torn at the heart Its fragrance befriends the breeze

Who can tell who destroyed it? We have spent this evening under sentence

No one has to go on this journey I can still turn round, if you want

Every street in this city is asleep It's my turn to stay awake

In the uncertain view of this evening The whole thing wavers

How can we honour our union When my heart is gripped by fear of separation

My heart desires above all That we make this evening ours

Please bring a token home from each journey Along with your worn-out feet, bring butterfly wings

I am writing the story of our companionship If you can, please bring a noble word

I hope fidelity will not exhaust us That we can renew this romance

That if in some enchanted place, you are captured by a moonlit face, you will carve a likeness, bring it home

Your passion for travel takes you away from home Please do not bring back regret like dust in your pockets

It is strange air that we all breathe May your eyes fill when you come home

LAST CONVERSATION WITH THE SKY

Although my feet are worn to shreds My journey ended nowhere Because I am incapable I have neither a lamp nor the ability To search for a way ahead This is all so difficult Such strain that my eyes Weep not tears but blood Such is my helplessness O my lord, my honoured one! A companion A companion

THE WIND, TOO, CAN CHANGE DIRECTION

Do you know? The wind, too, can change direction The birds might leave their nests at dawn And forget to find their way back Sometimes in spring the tree branches out Before autumn the leaves separate Like the paths my life takes Blown this way and that like dust The strange smile taking shape on your lips Says 'So, what's new?' Of everything in the story, you are new Do you know? But how could you know this? Your encampment of love and faith Could blow away like dust The wind, too, can change direction

کیا بتائیں کہ اب کے ساون میں ہم تجھے کتنا یادکرتے رہے

شہروالو! ہواكى بستى ميں پھُول، خُوشبو، چراغ كيسے رہے

تم نے جگنو سے دوستی کر لی ہم ستارے تلاش کرتے رہے

وصل جن کو نصیب ہو نہ سکا ہجر کی داستان لکھتے رہے Kept on compromising on life kept reciting poetry, kept blazing

I burned down with the lamps Your arrival was only a dream

I cannot explain how much I remember Of you in this monsoon

City people! Did the breeze convey Our village of flower, scent and lantern?

You befriended the firefly We kept searching for stars

Those who could not know union kept writing the story of separation

How hard it is to manage life As hard as making you my friend

There might be a whole new story Please get to the point

I might drown in these shadows Please light your eyes!

I am compelled by how it feels To make you sad yet unaware of your sadness

One must give blood from the heart Watch out! Do not write poetry

How hard it is for the self To deny what it all means!

There was a time when I loved alone Without dream or friend

There was a time when your love was untrue When I endured such torment that

I don't remember anything now but There was a river . . . or a villa . . .

You confused my heart so much That love shrank to a riddle

Yet had I been the slightest bit disloyal You would almost have taken my life

Time is like the snakes Devouring the jasmine in my courtyard

Who can I tell, this sad evening How bright the line of fate once was on my hand?

There was a heart that burnt out: light Light O god, O god light

Flower, perfume, stars, breeze: light These are your names, no matter how we shape you

When afternoon rose on the evening's horizon Who was it in my heart who said: light

Now there is no point in adorning the stars The season of meeting him is gone: light

Dawn broke on a dream in which I wrote simply by looking: light

The two curses we are trapped between: How we live in darkness, how we imagine: light