

COLUMNS

Beyond Wonder: A Poet's Journey

When silence is all around you
and your heart reverberates
with sounds no one hears
Then darkness weaves a path,
And calls you softly.
Come,
come to me.
Your feet spring up
on their toes
and follow the call
Silent, forlorn,
to the far end.
Love of darkness
Its chemistry?
I'll tell you,
when I return

—AZRA ABBAS, “Čup” (2006a, 81)

TAVERSING AN INNER JOURNEY that spans three decades of creative expression, Azra Abbas ('Azrā 'Abbās), in her latest collection *Hairat kē Us Pār* (On the Far Side of Wonder), emerges as a poetic voice that has gained depth and maturity. Receptive to life's little wonders, bemused at lost promises, faded dreams and loves gone sour, her poetry captures the human resolve to look beyond the mundane and let life take its course.

Her first book—*Nind kī Musāfatēn* (The Odyssey of Sleep), which consists of a single, long prose-poem written in stream of feminist consciousness—created a stir among admirers of the genre. Her later collections of poems, *Mēz par Rakbē Hāth* (Hands Lying on the Table) and *Maiñ Lā'ineñ Khēnčtī Hūñ* (I Draw Lines), established her as a distinct poetic voice that spoke with spontaneity and terse imagery on the ordinary aspects of life and its mundane drudgery and on female sexuality, a

voice that dealt with themes such as oppression, injustice, brutality and hypocrisy. Her use of colloquial, unadorned language, shorn of pretenses and interspersed with phrases peculiar to the feminine vernacular gives her poetry a character all its own.

Abbas's third published work was her memoir, *Mērā Bačpan* (My Childhood). A daring collage of memories, written in prose, about growing up as a female child in a male-dominated, restrictive milieu, the slim work was celebrated in the feminist circle and was soon translated into English by a women's publishing house. Abbas tried her hand at prose again in 2001, with a collection of nineteen short (some very short) stories, *Rāstē Mujbē Bulātē Haiñ* (Trails Beckon Me). The work, insipid and rather clichéd, was rightly ignored by readers and critics alike.

The choice of prose poetry as her favored genre came to Abbas, it would appear, quite spontaneously. In her brief epilogue to *Nind kī Musāfateñ* she connects her poems to storytelling as a child of ten to her grandmother. She would weave her stories around the faces she saw on the streets and share these with her grandmother who turned out to be an avid listener.

When she grew up she could not tell those stories to anyone. The stories juxtaposed, became kneaded into her thoughts and feelings and came pouring out one day in written words taking the form of a poem. This was *Nind kī Musāfateñ*, an odyssey of solitude for a young woman gliding by the vast expanse of her inner self, its at times desolate voids and chasms frightening for their emptiness, its occasional forest of desires and dreams enticing her to surrender to its lush foliage, until she reclaims her ability to see beyond her "self" to look at the "other" and question:

... behind this track are the shadows you saw in paths long trodden, where people bruise their souls to feed and clothe their bodies. But who weaves this net of hunger, cast upon the fading days, and who discovers our barrenness....

(Canto 2:1, 1988a, 126)¹

Her second and third collections, *Mēz par Rakbē Hāth* and *Maiñ Lā'inéñ Khēnčti Hūñ*—which appeared after a long break—were refreshing for their versatility of themes and simplicity of treatment. From the urban mayhem and violence she witnessed in her city, Karachi, to the human yearning for freedom, the struggle of daily life and her innermost thoughts and feelings as a woman, Abbas seems to find poetic expression

¹All translations are mine.

for all her mundane and sublime observations.

To get some dough
 We sell our dreams
 We wash out our colors
 We blow away our scent
 And dim our eyes

And grind our bodies
 In the thousand-year-old mill
 What else do we do?
 And what don't we!
 We don't grasp
 Except to get some dough.

(“Ēk Rōṭī tak Pahauñčnē Kē Liyē,” 1988b, 15)

Those who don't die in accidents
 while crossing the street
 are devoured by some epidemic
 and those who survive it
 suffocate, tangled in nets sprung on them by surprise.
 And those who escape all the tangles
 are killed by the ones left alive
 who then die their own deaths.

(“Ēk Nazm,” *ibid.*, 21)

Time
 has turned into a butterfly
 for me.
 And I, like a little girl
 run to fetch it,
 spreading my arms
 I advance slowly
 to pluck it
 from a wall
 a leaf
 a shard of sunshine.
 But she flutters her wings

and floats away,
farther
and farther.
She dances in front of my eyes,
and I dance too.
My scarf comes off
and my shoes cake with mud.
But this butterfly
is beyond my reach.
She advances
farther
and father
and my outspread palm
remains empty
of her soft delicate wings.

(“Titli,” *ibid.*, 35–36)

If you see a man
shot dead by a single bullet
in front of you,
so what.
You stand lifeless,
motionless
like a wall,
like a dustbin
or like the tree
that stands
a few steps away
from the dead man.
You’re frightened
No ... you don’t even utter an “oh.”
This happens every day
You watch it every day
You don’t turn your head
except to hasten your pace
returning home.
And while your wife, mother, sister
warms the food for you
You tell her

you have news
 of an event you witnessed
 Hot news
 to tell her
 at supper ...

(“Ā’i Viñnes,” 1996, 36)

In her latest collection of fifty-one poems, Abbas seems to have fully transcended her center of gravity—her “self” and the female body—and taken wing to fly outward where the boundaries of the “self” merge with the “other,” the outer world. Her many-layered poems deal with themes ranging from time and space to human bonding and alienation, from her dreams and desires to her two lands (her homeland and Britain where she now resides) and the four seasons. Very aptly, Abbas has dedicated the collection to the line from Ghālib’s eternal couplet *Hai kahān tamannā kā dūsrā qadam yā rab / Ham nē dasht-e imkān ko ēk naqsh-e pā payā* (Where, O Lord, is the next step of longing / I find the expanse of possibilities no more than a mere footprint).

Intertwining literal and figurative imagery, Abbas spins her poems around simple concepts and succeeds, in the process, with her wit and optimism, in evoking not only deep feelings and reflections in the reader, but also delight. In her poem “Sab Din Ēk Jaisē Nahiñ Hōtē” (Not All Days Are the Same), she conjures up an image of time in its simplest measure—a passing day—and chronicles the eternal story of the human struggle with the impermanence of life and the triumph of hope:

Not all days are the same,
 Yesterday was not
 what today is.
 Each day, coiled in its hideout,
 confronts us at the break of dawn,
 and laughs in our faces.
 Come and spend it, it says.
 And we straighten our backs
 to spend the day.
 We live it,
 and look back when the day is gone,
 fading with the sun
 hiding its face in darkness.
 How haughty it was

as if it wouldn't let us live it,
 would defeat us
 And we, humbled and lowly,
 would beseech
 with our high head bowed,
 with our eyes wide open,
 would implore that today be a day we spent once,
 A day never forgotten.
 Better to let all days go by,
 mundane, unceremonious
 We won't bow our heads
 we'll hold them straight
 forever
 So they won't hang low
 No matter how bad the day.

(2006a, 15–17)

In “Lafzōñ kā Zavāl” (The Downfall of Words) she talks about words losing the power to affect in this age. Once rebellious and determined, she says, words walked over hearts and minds, but now, impotent and immobile, speechless and wide-eyed, they stand abandoned, destined to be thrown in the water, washed away forever, carried into oblivion. The poem's subtext throws up questions about communication, the media, the blurring boundaries between truth and falsehood, and the validity of words over time.

It's time for the downfall
 of Words.
 Hot headed, lofty
 They walked over hearts
 and trampled heads.
 Now they'll stand alone, vacant-eyed
 Amidst silence and desolation
 and sounds of striking objects
 won't touch them
 Water will flow
 and no wave will answer.
 All shall push them
 into the sea
 silently.

This is their fate.

(*ibid.*, 13–14)

Azra Abbas taught Urdu literature in a government college in Karachi until a few years ago. She now devotes herself fully to creative work in London where she resides with her husband, Anwar Senroy, who works for the BBC Urdu Service. She continues to experiment with different genres of creative expression and finished her first novel, *Maiñ aur Mūsā* (Mūsā and I), which has recently come out. □

—ZEEBAT HISAM

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Dancing with Rumi

THERE HAS BEEN a commotion in many literary circles in Pakistan. Fahmida Riaz and Maulānā Jalālu’d-Dīn Rūmī? Surely, this is an uneasy alliance! And not just uneasy, perhaps even impossible, logically speaking, for these were two incommensurables, poles apart, having no common measure. No linguistic or conceptual terms could possibly overlap in describing them. Or so the hubbub goes.

Some political and topical issues are also invoked in this learned tumult. Fahmida Riaz, we are reminded, is a self-confessed leftist, and a feminist to boot. She is the woman poet who brought the most intimate embodiments of womanhood outside the veil and exposed them to a whole world of unsuspecting spectators, the poet for whom a woman’s

physical body, her biological features, and her sexuality became legitimate material for poetic treatment and open expression. She has shocked many a conservative, and many seniors; many poetic grandfathers have been embarrassed by her daring audacities. And beyond that, she has even been formally charged by the slain military dictator Zia ul Haq with the capital crime of treasonable activity.

Then there is the Maulānā. A Sufi par excellence. A saint unparalleled. A mufti of the Seljuks of Rūm, a qazi, a scholar of divine law, a madrasa sheikh. He is steeped in the Qur'ān, soaked in the Islamic religious tradition. His verse is glittered all over with Qur'ānic quotations. His imagination was inspired by the Divine Word brought into the flow of history by Archangel Gabriel! These two—Fahmida as we hitherto knew her and Rūmī as he is—are like oil and water, one excluding the other, unmixable. So the ever-louder voices have been declaring. And then, a simple explanation is being proffered—there has been a rebirth of Fahmida Riaz!

All this dust has been raised by the publication of a slender volume, a volume of Fahmida Riaz's Urdu translations of a tiny selection of Rūmī's more than 30,000 Persian verses from his famous and indeed redoubtable *Dīwān-e Shams-e Tabrizī*. What we have here then is a double event: one being the publication itself, the other being the grander event—the surprises, shocks, and incredulities this publication has generated.

They are both highly instructive.

First, through this literary commotion one is able to discern how fashionable, how unlearned and how frivolous, with a minuscule exception, Pakistan's leftism and Marxism have been. Granted, reading *Das Kapital* is not easy; to begin with, it is too long. But having no inkling of its substantive range, its terminology, its stylistic peculiarities, its recognized sources—this is a cardinal sin in the dwindling chambers standing to the left of the aisle. It behooves these trendy ones to know that in the early nineteenth century a German savant, Friedrich Ruckert—a disciple of the indefatigable translator of Rūmī into German, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall—had consciously tried to imitate Rūmī's poetry in his language, thus pioneering the naturalization of the ghazal form in German literature as well as a wider European familiarity with the great Sufi. It is through Ruckert that the famous philosopher Hegel became familiar with Rūmī. Then, in his discourses on mysticism, Hegel invoked and praised Rūmī. And finally, in turn, these discourses reached none other than Karl Marx himself. Let it be known that Marx's theory of commodity fetishism appears in the context of this very Rūmī-imbued Hegelian mysticism. So, Rūmī is not so far a cry from Karl Marx, after all.

Then, another phenomenon is thrown into sharp relief by the disbelief some commentators are expressing. This disbelief, resolved by postulates of Fahmida Riaz's rebirth, betrays a theory of literature that is at best truncated, at worst, it is painfully superficial. Topicalities, political orientations, ideological inclinations, historical contingencies, all these do matter for the poet and her poetry. But no poetry worth its salt is a mere ideological manifesto or an ornate report of events. Nor is it locked in a specific historical moment or frozen in a single cultural milieu. Great poetry—whether of Ghālib, Iqbāl, or Faiz, or of Shakespeare or Blake—while certainly arising from accidents of history, goes beyond these accidents to speak to human yearnings that have cosmic proportions. In this sense, all poetry is a journey to the metaphysical. What fails to perform this journey is jettisoned.

Being a superb poet, Fahmida Riaz would do the same. So, for example, she would take female anatomy and reproductive biological processes, the mundane, and raise them to a cosmic level, the metaphysical. Or she would talk about the weakening grip of her faith in the transcendental (call it leftism, Marxism, liberalism, whatever), and then assert the transcendental in resolution. This is her dialectic. In this way she gives us a mirror in which all humanity can, in principle, see its face. Yes, it is in this mirror that we meet and she meets Rūmī. Rūmī, too, plays in the cosmic arena and he too begins with the mundane—the braying of a donkey or the dried reed or the breath of the flute player or the skin and flesh and bones that give us our physical body. Perhaps it doesn't matter, in the final analysis, whether one reaches that cosmic arena inspired by a Qur'ānic phrase or the plight of the proletariat. Poetry transcends its own substance.

Thirdly, the many disbelieving responses to the Fahmida-Maulānā pairing betray an historical hollowness. Let me issue a reminder: Fahmida Riaz has always been grounded in her own tradition, and in her own classics. So, nota bene, just as Rūmī quotes Qur'ānic verses so does his Pakistani companion. Already in her second collection, the scandalous *Badan Darīda* (Torn-Bodied) written more than 30 years ago, in a poem titled “Aē Valī-o-Rabb-e Kaun-o-Makāñ” (O Ruler and Lord of the Created Cosmos!), she quotes the first verse of the opening chapter of the Qur'ān: “Praise belongs to the Lord of the Worlds!” This is a powerful and terrifying poem ending with the line, “Tell me: How do I open the closed doors of my heart?”

In this same early collection, which contains such infamous erotic poems as “Abad” (Eternity) and “Lā’ō Apnā Hāth Lā’ō Zarā” (Just Let Me

Have Your Hand)—both incubated in the complex warmth of female sexuality, we also see poems such as “Tilāvat” (Qur’ān Recitation) and “Sūra-e Yāsīn” (The Qur’ānic Chapter Yāsīn). Similarly, for example, sitting in the company of the explicitly sensuous “Zabānōñ kā Bōsa” (Kiss of the Tongues) and “Kab Tak?” (How Long?) are poems such as “Iqlīmā” (name of Abel and Cain’s sister) and “Ēk Lamḥa-e ‘Irfān” (A Moment of Gnosis): the first naming the scriptural daughter of Adam and expressly speaking about the Qur’ānic characters Abel and Cain, the second soaked in mystic expressions referring to angels.

We must receive Fahmida Riaz in her totality. This totality is eminently complex and does not easily fit into this or that ideological or political pigeonhole in any case. Among other things, one clearly finds in her poetic tapestry a bright-colored thread spun out of tradition, a tradition inspired by the invincible literary monuments of her own civilization. Looked at in this way, Fahmida Riaz’s translation of Rūmī’s ghazals, far from manifesting a break with her past, is a happy fulfillment of her poetic promise. It is not a rebirth, it is full maturity.

At the end of this volume, the poet has appended three pages of her exquisite prose entitled “Hairat-Kada” (The Chamber of Wonder). Here she speaks of feeling overtaken by someone dancing enraptured in the forest, dancing in the full bloom of life, now smiling, now sad. The process of this translation, she tells us, was a dance with someone bursting forth with life’s energies, with someone in whom she saw herself drowned. By her own confession, then, this companionship with the dancing dervish seems to have come to pass in an overwhelming mystical moment, in the “Lamḥa-e ‘Irfān” which was spoken of already long ago in *Badan Darida*. And yet, even in this ecstasy of hers, Fahmida Riaz does not abandon her intellectual and moral control, abandoning neither respect nor care for the grand Rūmī and the resilient tradition he embodies. If she had lost control, the product would have been insanity not poetry.

“I have translated each and every word with respect and care,” she writes. This degree of circumspection in an ecstatic dance is quite remarkable. But this is to speak poetically. Speaking critically too, her claim is true. Fahmida Riaz has translated Rūmī’s selected ghazals in very simple, very flowing Urdu verse with minimal interference in the original text. Almost always, if a Persian word or phrase happened to be familiar in Urdu expressions, she has left it untranslated. When in Rūmī’s ghazal there is a *radif* (unchanging rhyme word or a string), she supplies one; when there is none, she supplies none. But over and above all this, there

is yet another outstanding feature of the translations, yet another gesture of respect, yet another marker of intellectual control: by and large, she has reproduced the meters of these Persian ghazals and this is no minor skill.

Fahmida Riaz, the poet of *Patthar ki Zabān* (The Stone's Tongue) and *Badan Darīda*, has come of age. □

—SYED NOMANUL HAQ

Jalālu'd-Dīn Rūmī. *Yeh Khāna-e Āb-o-Gil*.
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New Orbits of Being

THE FLOOR OF THE ROOM where he was sitting on a wooden chair was lower than the level of the lawn where I was standing. He asked me to jump into the room through the French window for he felt too lazy to walk up to the closed door on the other side which opened into a corridor leading to the main door of the house, which was also closed. "You people have made Mīr and Ghālib guard the doors of poetry. One has to enter through the window, but I stay inside and the old guards stay outside" he said, setting the tone as my feet touched the floor of his room. That was the beginning of my first meeting, a typical one, with Munīr Niāzī.

"I am not against them, but critics in Pakistan must learn to appreciate the brilliance of others as well. Living in and glorifying the past too much undermines the equally sensitive and powerful expression of today. Let others bloom as well, it is good for people too," he continued in the same vein. "How old were you when you came to know about me?" he asked. I told him how, when young, I once randomly picked up an aesthetically produced, hardbound book as a birthday gift for my father. It was in 'Ali 'Abbās Jalālpūrī's *Rivāyat-e-Falsafa* (The Traditions of Philosophy) that I saw Munīr Niāzī's name for the first time in print, since he was the publisher of that book. And I was in my teens when I started reading his work and became an unflinching fan of his verse. He is the only one who grew on me after those early years of reading contemporary Urdu poetry

because the others that I liked at the time were replaced very soon. Convinced of my being on his side, he felt somewhat energized, got up and went inside to ask for tea. Narcissistic, innocent and witty, he was measured, self-possessed and hugely loveable whenever I met him.

There were a few more meetings at his Township residence in Lahore. Each one was a treat. "Among my contemporaries, who do you think is a *mazbūt shā'ir* (powerful poet) after me?" he once asked. It was taken for granted that he was the best, the "after me" in the question put that beyond doubt. There were few, if any, names one could choose. I told him that I liked Iftikhār 'Arif, Fahmida Riāz and Sāqī Fārūqī from the generation that came just after him; Nūn Mīm Rāshid, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Majid Amjad and Akhtaru'l-Īmān from the ones who came before him. He was not too amused and said after a pause, "This is too many." Risking further disapproval, I told him that I also liked many other poets of Urdu and other languages. He looked at me intently and then said, "Hmmm, at least your choice of poets reflects the fact that you read other things besides poetry. Rāshid, Akhtaru'l-Īmān and Fahmida need you to be at a certain level before you reach them. I read little these days, but am always curious about what is being said and written. If you get time, could you write me a paragraph on each book you like? I mean not the poetry books, other books." Then we discussed each of the poets I had mentioned and he was truly generous in his praise. That was rather unusual. What a pleasure it was and what an honor for me to listen to an exceptional creative genius unwinding and sharing his feelings and beliefs.

The awe, the range, the uncertainty and the newness made Munīr Niāzī the master of his technique. Once I was asked by an erudite friend who wants to categorize everyone whether I see Munīr Niāzī as a modern or a postmodern poet. I told him that I see him as the most modern poet of our times, whether postmodern or not. And this was not mere wordplay. I actually believe he possessed a completely different style and metaphor. Fitting him into a box based on existing categories of literary analysis is truly difficult, if not impossible. Even the poetry of his that was used in film songs enjoyed mass popularity for its depth of emotion and fluidity, comparable to none.

Without using the much-cherished *gurez* (digression with a meaning) in content or form, he had the ability to take the reader beyond the narrative through sheer emotion or thought. He had the confidence to write a one-line poem if that conveyed what he felt. Whether it was a two-liner or a three-liner, a short poem or a long one, he would not interfere with his own creative flow by guiding it with the compulsions of structure, ap-

pearance, or detail that was felt by so many others.

In my view, his Punjabi poems share the same sensibility and style, and even the same syntactical patterns that mark his Urdu poems. But the richness of Punjabi idiom never clashes with his poetic process, which is essentially in Urdu. In fact, the poetic process is made more meaningful by introducing words and ideas that came to him naturally from his environs. Among other bilinguals, Faiz harbors a characteristically Persianized diction in Urdu on the one hand, and a completely rustic expression in the few Punjabi poems he wrote. The genius of Iqbal pronounces itself quite differently, in both style and treatment, when he writes in Persian. Munir Niazi has one corpus of work—Urdu-Punjabi.

Munir Niazi resembles an impressionist painter in the realm of our poetry, and is perhaps the only one of his kind. He would not illustrate his poems with moral lessons by using historic or religious metaphors even if they were in praise of God or religious figures. With loose brushwork and in a wide array of bright colors, as impressionists would, he paints the landscapes of human life and physical nature and mixes the two effortlessly. The inanimate objects of nature come alive and take charge. Another quality that resembles the impressionists is his flare for using phrases, lines, and similes to quickly capture the essence of a subject rather than its details; the way impressionists might use short, thick strokes of paint.

While there is neither obvious veneration nor disdain for political ideals in Munir Niazi's work, his love of life and humanity is uncompromised throughout. He takes his readers along into new orbits of being and introduces them, in a most extraordinary way, to the wide horizons of the bittersweet life we experience today. On 26 December 2006 Urdu lost one of its best and most unique poets. □

—HARRIS KHALIQUE

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