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Zer-e-CharKh-e-Kuhan¹ and other poems

Shafiq Fatima Shera
Introduced and translated by
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Introduction:

Shafiq Fatima Shera's (1930-2012) poems embody a singular voice in modern Urdu poetry. Born in Nagpur, and educated in Aurangabad, she resided in Hyderabad where she taught at a college. She authored four collections of poetry, but her entire poetic oeuvre is gathered under the title, "Silsila-e-Makalamāt", published in 2006. Often drawing from Arabic and Persianate cultural traditions, her poems unfold a layered complexity at both, thematic as well as expressive strata. Abounding in rich metaphors as well as textured imagery, the lexical as well as imaginative fabric of her poems tends towards an evident expansiveness. Frequently relying on subtle suggestiveness through metaphor-laden images, Shera's poetic world does not yield to easy accessibility, thus defying the dictates and demands of popular consumption. Nevertheless, her work has played a prime role in expanding the thematic and expressive

¹ These translations first appeared in The Beacon as *Under the Ancient Sky and Other Poems*

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contours of modern Urdu poetry, especially in relation to the body of work produced by modern/contemporary women-poets in Urdu. To that end, as a poet's poet, Shera has held an esteemed position among the contained group of literati resolutely engaged with Urdu literature.

Under the Ancient Sky²

at midnight, land's guffaw
echoing resounding
collided with the skies
deserting moonlight's resplendence
the moon remained ablaze
a ruthless heart
kept laughing with such abrasiveness
as if there was no God for us

inscribed on mountain-ranges
centuries' reed-woodwinds
tumult of conch-shells, calls to prayer
chirpings engraved on each leaf
melody of the reed-flute immersed in brooks
all, with abated breath, stayed quiet
and the star-embossed cupola devoid of columns
listlessly kept gazing

under the ancient sky, how my heart bled grief!

Boundless Void³

from vacant resplendence, from vacuous fire
from all mysteries of empty time
ill-fated, cold, wretched

clouds, moonlight, rainbow, galaxies
no wayfarer, no caravan
is its lot

² "Zer-e-CharKh-e-Kuhan" p. 40.

³ "Khalā- be-Karāñ p. 56.

there was nothing, there isn't, there won't be ever
downing all dense thirst
it itself became extinct

barren heart, path devoid of journey,
deserted ruin of night without daybreak
a prayer-house of tumult
boundless void, refuge from the void
in dignity's name, whatever spread here
all are aware –

Captive⁴

the highlands are submerged in horizon's red mist
the birds hush their twitters in shrubs
the tumult of the grass-grove abated, stars string
pearls in the boughs of dense branches

maidens all, carrying their water-pots, returned home since long
from their windows now light is sieved shyly
the smoke from the clay-ovens, spiral after spiral, wafts in the court
twilight's sadness becomes a murmur, a song

this water which gave fragrance to flowers, hue to grass,
melded sweetness in the melodies of carefree sparrows,
granted coolness to the hearts of yellow fiery knolls –
how did it pour finally into my distraught smile?

placing the empty water-pot on the edge, in this thought I am lost
what are these shackles that have chained me?

Sita⁵

with your name dawn rises
stars' soiree sings your songs

⁴ "Asīr" p. 66-67

⁵ "Sītā" p. 37-39.

the dust of your feet-Hind's grandeur's mystery
your existence – the destination of my dreams
hearing your account, I shook, I trembled
slowly, softly, my heart started pounding

in their bosom hide some secrets
the scorching boulders of Deccan's highlands –
some wayfarers had come to these forests
in the air are scattered their fables
those eyes compassionate, that magic in speech

those sturdy arms, those hefty bows
that selfless devotee of her beloved
the hut of thatched leaves, the river-bank
the radiance of affection sieving through glances
the star of fidelity luminous on the forehead
flowers of delight raining everywhere
Time too, stopping, was steeped in the spectacle

that incessant journey, those tempests of calamities
those blisters in feet, those smiling eyes-
to keep soothing the heart in far-off lands sometimes
sometimes cold sighs in longing for the homeland
for years on end you remained a traveler
the passion was to traverse the paths of devotion

but there remained still some tribulations
there were still more trials ahead
captivity and that too captivity of a demon
your protectors were very far from you
your chaste disposition, however, was a shield
in front of you the demons were powerless

invoking your name then arose some valiant-ones
brave, spirited, truly heroic who
quaked the vault-chambers of the empire-
your protectors possessed great dignity
your return was proclaiming that
brightness is never effaced by darkness

the tyrannies you endured all became fables
now was unfolding the epoch of recompense
but oh! what kind of recompense was this!
again, you were handed a dwelling in forests

a cross of motherliness that was there
it too, it was binding to carry alone
strange is this enigma of meeting and separation
for even after reaching it the destination was not attained
what oppression was this that the goddess of purity
came to offer the evidence of her own virtue
like flame she passed through flames
like lightning she was drawn into earth

Ellora⁶

today the quest for the repose of Gautama's heart has
brought this heart to far-off wilderness

in these caverns is spread some soiree whose
lanterns are luminous, roses fresh
chalices pass in circles, the cupbearer is generous to all
from closed eyes overflows an exhilaration eternal
striking the portals and walls, the wind sings –
light, to kiss the feet of the glowing sun,
gains access as moonlight
moments of dawn and dusk come flowing,
and intoning melodies, bowing reverently, drift away
in the vistas is the sound of angels' wings

sighting me, on each lip began to flutter smile's glimmer
a voice rose up:
this is mystery's pathway, not a common thoroughfare
why has thirst brought you here?
why do you not have a wineglass in your hand?
life itself is a brimming chalice
if there are drinkers they are privy to the residue at the depths
with the fury of struggle's fire this wine turns goblet-dissolving

⁶ "Ellora" p. 27-30.)

if there are drinkers then there is provision for everlasting intoxication
for there is no empty cup in life's tavern

the intoxication of splendid action delighted us
we roused a slumbering epoch
due to intimacy's agony, we kept on writhing like waves
and then arose like rolling clouds

unabated we poured over deserts and wastelands and habitations
on eastern lands, on the abode of spring, we rained
intoxication of splendid action, becoming the bounty of spring,
permeated each tree and leaf, each flower-bud
we intoxicated an epoch
and in turn were intoxicated ourselves –

why has thirst brought you here?
this is mystery's pathway, not a common thoroughfare
embarrassed I strode out of the miasma
under the burning sun in the blue sky

how bright is the atmosphere!
from the vistas sieves the light of youth's exuberance
valleys resonate with the chimes of the rushing brook
rays hop around dancing everywhere
unbound breeze caresses the green grass
there's beauty in the wild, there's uproar, there's abundance,
and such hush in the vicinity that sensation's breath stifles
on the roads is a horde of walking corpses
life's punishment is infirmity, helplessness
the air is poisoned by the stench of gas and fumes
the acme of knowledge is menacing and tormenting
all-consuming love is bereft of forbearance and strength
and despair deprivation is the recompense for youth
there is restriction on reflective thought
just in uttering the truth there is apprehension about infamy
prestige is a prey
life's lament is acute and spark-igniting
everywhere there are merely oppressors and the oppressed,
merely rulers and the ruled
who shall we ask, where is Man?

who shall we ask, why even now
this world is a gaol –

what all demands does the parched-lipped Time make of me!
and I am silent
in my crystal are bloodstained tears
the blood of verve, desires and fervors
this regret brings me
from habitation to far-off wilderness
where lamps are illumined in the caverns,
and in nature's tranquil grove
splendorous songs blossom

Return⁷

towards the psalm-field of pain we head
not an atom be trampled by this pace
towards the psalm-field of pain we head
in the grove of trees the sun was peering
on the hilltops, in the green woods, was the fête of dazzling light
the fête shall last till eternity

shall last
towards the psalm-field of pain we head
a body kneaded with ruby and marble
and beyond it next to it
like lightning, a purifying existence
scattered everywhere, silent derelict skies
where are we where are we — this is the psalm-field of pain (where are
we?)
so voiceless as if
the soul had extracted
its radiance from each fiber of the body
gently harmlessly
and remoteness of the body and the soul were purged of lament
how fleet-footed dejection and fruitlessness makes us
as if a part of a cloud
would fling its sheep-skin water-bag high above in the air
towards thirsty particles,

⁷ "Bāzgasht" in *Āfāq-e-Navā* p. 39-41

would then spread feathery wings, fly,
swing
as an inscription of fading forming colors
that the blooming atoms see it
and exclaim:
that waning fire, unworthy grandeur!
it's an eternal affliction, that red spotless brightness
(there, the fountainheads of breath have dried up, each grievance has
ended)
what grievance did they hold against the fountainhead of breath;
the ones who breathe here?
the laughter-ripple devoid of time
how did it sprout from my lips;
is there some active power in us;
which can ruin us thus and laugh!
from the inception it was set on effacing us
even if it itself would become an attendant eventually
its protest which is an energy in me
how clamorous it is
how forceful it is
further from the psalm-field of pain it takes me
into those landscapes where
the returning echo turns into its song
as if all knolls, rocks, and hill-ranges
were included in the fountainhead of breath;
throbbing, alive, and one-voiced!

Horizon Within Horizon⁸

shrinking expanding ceaselessly burning and fading
when horizons rise repeatedly, when horizons ebb repeatedly
then what is our job but to keep rowing our boat

horizon, arch within arch, spreads its portals
gestures of pursuit flash like lightning
paths change, distances keep growing
sometimes to walk with no caravan, without a lantern, without the sound
of bells

⁸ *Ufaq-dar-Ufaq* p. 79-81

be it catastrophe but we just have to walk
for to walk is destiny, to be together is a favor
which is bequeathed without asking and taken away without assent

the slightest matter, and crystal-glasses shatter
the slightest matter, pains the heart for long, aggrieves it
indifference, though is pleasing, is still vexing

winds of dispersal, in a moment, how they upturn
the orders of Time, and at the hands of the divine decree,
beyond the shining smiling suns of faith
horizons, turning to dust-clouds of the path, descend

look there! bursting from the fissures of dark roads
we name it blessing — each grievance,
coming here, propitiates the penitents

sitting next to bonfires how many cold evenings
pass as if dreams were passing, heart agonizes
that these evenings kneaded in the continuum of nights,
and nights in bright dawns, would have attained the length of infinity,
eternal life —

but these circle within circle realities, pardon!
always rushing in the way to bequeath loneliness
if their blood were to congeal on our sleeves
these undying flames of the bright bonfires would dowse,
horizon's engravings and our visages, all would be effaced

pathways' belongings, fatigue inaugural fatigue final,
the landscapes that reside as tears in a perceptive eye,
all those thorns whose stings cannot be cloaked even by resolute
exertions,
next to the bonfires, frequently, in the passion of self-ostentation,
they begin to be cast in a song, in a parable —

this sorrow is so adequate, this sorrow is the worth of existence
for we, in proclaiming it and hearing it, would be pacified

possibility scattered on this shore and that shore of the horizon
what we used to call a path was a dream, a frenzy

for reaching the mornings of unheard voice
for traversing the valley of an infinity-downing loneliness
it was an endearing pretext to come close to the bonfires
such dance of roses' fragrance it was that Age was in a gyre –

Dhul-Nun's Story⁹

and Dhul-Nun spoke thus:
there, Time was pastoral, a beginning
yet it wasn't so –

merely in our own eyes there be our own splendor

terror

there, Time was not terror
and Dhul-Nun prayed:
make me feathery-winged again
that to my being I may
call out in spacious vistas
may awaken in spacious vistas
the uproar of frenzied eons –
He was not then in the dark belly of the fish,
was on the sands of the shore
and the entreaty continued

Without refuge, dimensionless
Time is expanse

Time, each moment, is a sword's wound
be it sunshine or air rife with roughness
all swallow their morsel,
their visage abundant and absent
suddenly interjecting
a verdant canopy of vines and flowers
sprouted and began to spread
and in its shade the knowledge of reckoning
kept counting the folios –
buds are created through a novel creation
clasping sunrays' lances, green candles luminous –
apart from us too there is someone
in the circles of sight
sight's solace

⁹ "Hikāyāt-e-Dhul-Nun" p. 82-84

in the circles of sight whatever there is
is contained in the bounds of existence
from the infirm being swells
a shoreless plenitude — the luster of vision
burgeons at last beyond bounds
the clamor of enchanted eons –
then He rose one day on guarded feet
together with the secure boundaries of His existence
when narrow trails led Him to a firm thoroughfare,
the firm thoroughfare was a python
such that whatever it would swallow
 it would spew out after masticating –
in the reflexive motions of its powerful jaws
 [was] the tumult of self-propelled, blood-soaked Times

Promised Land¹⁰

the land of promise did not arrive –
that lofty peak which is surrounded by all eyes
carefree, unblemished, steadfast,
that unfathomable sea in whose depths
there is no one but us –
the land of promise did not arrive
[hope] that despair does not fossilize us
[hope] that restiveness does not singe us
[hope] that the wounded bird of quest itself does not go missing
..... along with the flight in the dark canyon
[if] we are, then this is plentiful
[if] we are, then is alive the profundity of the promises
a current of swelling waves after waves
which flows in the desert of oblivion
its paths are set beforehand
and there is no path divergent from these
in the rocky terrains of hard truth –
strewing the golden mist of desires
a colorful falsehood spouting from the founts of truth
searching for the sea of truth, honeyed falsehood
flowing singing water of jaunty intrepid dreams

¹⁰ “Arz-e-Mau’ūd” in *Āfāq-e-Navā*, p. 31-33

at this juncture, proliferates even beyond its destination –
then what is our fault?
when do suns of fulfillment melt,
meld in the blush of promises
far from the spell of rising and waning
neither does the day progress nor does the night pass
lively lustrous radiances flow around
and intoxicating mists as if springtime –
promises innumerable keep blossoming in flowers,
shine in stars,
in heartbeats, in breaths,
a pleasant vista keeps unfolding
from the earth to the sky
from the heart to the eyes
..... in the vastness of the primordial and the infinite

Itinerant Birds¹¹

horizon to horizon an azure sky –
where, the itinerant birds' destination?
far away, behind, beyond that sea
snow kept falling, kept frosting depth within depth near the nests –
then vistas recognizable,
furnishing an invite of vagrancy-laden melancholy, with flooding eyes,
shivered

for perhaps, way far away,
beyond that sea,
emerald-embossed shores might have received the salutation of festivity,
the soft sounds of sunlight's fete,
sun's fiery song

horizon to horizon an azure sky
there is no rose-branch no parapet
where, for a moment or two, folding wings like petals, one could perch
where, for a moment or two, one could chirp
gathering up weary wings, if someone plummeted,
air's hem did not turn teary a bit

¹¹ "Musāfir Parinde" p. 53-55

nor did the tempest of savage winds cease
stars customarily kept shining in the azure
spindles of days and nights whirling like a vortex –
where, the itinerant birds' destination?
far away, behind, beyond that sea
each fresh heart-elating melody, frozen
under the pyramids congeal dream-engrossed
lyres of creeks, courts of springtime,
biers of hundred-hued knolls, of crowns and jewels,
of flowers –
the lamentation of frozen existence

far away, behind, beyond that sea
that solitary world of illumination
that solitary rose behind the thorn-field
that solitary grain under the snare –
it is quite something to see this and pause!
but alas! at this turn today, merely soaring and sound [is],
the gain of a handful of wings
the gain of the fable of wings