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Mann men jamī barf

Shabnam Ashai

Introduced & translated by

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Translating the poetry of Dr. Shabnum Ashai has been less an exercise in translation and more an act of listening—to silences, to pauses, to wounds that speak in whispers rather than declarations. These poems do not merely narrate experiences; they inhabit them. They move through the landscapes of love and loss, fidelity and betrayal, exile and belonging, carrying within them the fragrance of Kashmir, the ache of memory, and the resilience of a deeply reflective feminine consciousness.

What makes this body of work particularly distinctive is its rare ability to inhabit two seemingly divergent literary sensibilities at once. These poems are unmistakably postmodern in their fractured interiority, their distrust of grand certainties, their shifting symbols, and their deeply personal engagement with memory, identity, and loss. Yet, despite this modern consciousness, they retain the fragrance and grace of the classical tradition. Their emotional cadence, symbolic richness, and meditative depth often recall the timeless worlds of classical Urdu and Kashmiri poetry. One encounters in them a voice that is contemporary in form and sensibility, yet classical in taste and temperament.

The world of these poems is woven from deceptively simple images: a *pheran*, a courtyard, a broken forehead, a snowfall, a deserted road, a curfew-stricken city, an empty swing, an airport trolley, a fading fragrance, a dream half-remembered. Yet these are never merely objects or scenes. They become metaphors for inner landscapes, repositories of memory, and symbols through which the poet negotiates the complex relationship between self and world. In Dr. Ashai's poetry, grief acquires fragrance, silence learns speech, and hope continues to glow beneath the

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ashes of disillusionment.

The challenge of translating these poems lay not in transferring words from one language into another, but in preserving their emotional temperature. Urdu possesses a delicacy of expression, a musicality of sorrow, and a density of cultural memory that often resists direct translation. Wherever possible, the imagery, rhythm, and symbolic architecture of the originals have been retained while allowing the poems to breathe naturally in English. Certain words and cultural references have been preserved because they belong not merely to language, but to an entire emotional and civilizational inheritance.

At the heart of these poems stands a voice that is at once intimate and universal. It is the voice of a woman who confronts love without illusion, endures loss without surrender, and transforms suffering into artistic revelation. Her poetry does not search for easy resolutions; rather, it inhabits uncertainty with remarkable dignity. It understands that longing can become a form of prayer, that memory can become a homeland, and that fidelity—even when wounded—remains one of the most luminous possibilities of human existence.



1

Love
dwells in the whisperings of the soul.
I pass my hands
over the lips of my heart
to touch it.
Love lives
in the moisture of tears.
The tissue paper
keeps drinking that moisture,
yet love remains thirsty.
If you are thirsty,
become a spring.
Do not inflame the fire
with burning words.
Entrust those smoldering words
to me.
I am earth—

I can drink
the poison of words.
Love is thirsty;
become a spring

2

Take off,
for a moment,
the shoes of air
from your feet.
Step into
the gathering of the earth
and see.
See how your flight
has emptied life
of longing.
Unaware,
those feet shod in air
have crushed
countless flowers,
have given birth
to untold suffering.
Take off
the shoes of air
and look—
just once,
look at love.
Look at the imprint
your footsteps
have carved
upon love's breast.
Look closely.
Look at love,
breathless and wounded.

3

Your hands,
the support of responsibility's branches—
they felt to me
like your very own words.

That single finger of yours,
 my companion,
 with which you would touch me gently,
 and I would speak in silence,
 uttering little nothings
 that only your soul could understand.
 Now that finger rests upon my cheek,
 and I walk along the delicate path of thought.
 But if words dare rise from my tongue,
 they falter—
 fragile, trembling.
 Even now,
 the fragrance of that finger's memory
 lingers in the air,
 where gardens once bloomed
 with the perfume of jasmines.
 Each day it calls me,
 where shadows of silence spread,
 and I, lost,
 wander through desolate alleys of longing.
 From the depths of yearning and
 desert of absence,
 I see you standing—
 graceful as a cypress,
 with noble composure,
 smiling gently,
 as though guiding my path.
 This endless journey of separation
 has placed in my hands
 a burden of tears.

4

You broke it—
 You broke the poem.
 At dawn,
 it had walked beside me,
 running with me
 on the Tread mill.
 While kneading the dough,
 while grinding spices on the stone slab,
 it had stepped out of the kitchen
 hand in hand with me.

In the shower,
 I had hidden it within my breath.
 While adorning myself,
 I had painted my lips
 with its very nectar.
 At the breakfast table,
 it too had sipped tea with me,
 sharing every taste.
 On the journey,
 while crossing the river,
 it swayed with me in the boat.
 In the office,
 it climbed the stairs with me,
 holding my finger, step by step.
 But you broke it—
 you broke the poem.
 Now, when I leave work in the evening,
 with whom
 shall I go home?
 You broke it—
 you broke the poem.

5

I have hung the poem
 upon a nail—
 so that in this crowd of strangers
 there may be at least one familiar soul
 who will place a hand upon my shoulder
 and say:
 “Parting from you,
 I have parted from myself!”
 Alas—
 all the familiar ones
 have turned into emotional bankrupts,
 becoming prey themselves!
 Yet, it is strange
 that all of them
 have set up an exhibition of feelings.
 Come,
 O restless heart,

take the poem down from the nail,
and whisper in its ear:
“That in parting from you,
I too had parted from myself!”

Tousif Raza is a scholar of the English language who writes not only in his mother tongue, Kashmiri, but also in Urdu. He has established himself as a poet, translator, essayist, and columnist. He has translated Ashai’s poetry collection *Mann men jamī barf* as *Frozen snow within the soul*. His earlier translations include *Auraq-e-Gum Gashta* (a collection of poems by Satish Vimal) and *Wounds and Whispers* (translated from the poetry of Ali Shaida).