Translations 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.
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
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

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 pharoah’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.  

(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
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,
ext 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)