

## Vocabulary of Resistance: A Conversation with Kishwar Naheed

By Mahwash Shoaib

Kishwar Naheed, as all her biographers note, was born in 1940 in Bulandshahr, India. As her family moved to Pakistan at the partition of the sub-continent, the bloodshed at that time left an impression on her at a tender age; she has also been witness to the struggles and aspirations that Pakistan has gone through as a nation. Her written work, spanning for more than four decades, chronicles her experiences as a woman writer engaged in the creative and civic arenas, even as she has dealt with personal, social, and official backlashes. Her stature as the matriarch of Urdu poetry is lodged in her prolificacy as a writer, her reworking of the lyrical ghazal, the innovations she helped bring about in the forms of free verse and prose poetry, and the extensive translations she has made of radical poets from other languages. Kishwar Naheed's poetic oeuvre consists of ten volumes of poetry, where her voice has grown "louder, more insistent and somehow more intimate" (Steele 343). She won the Adamjee Prize of Literature for her first collection, *Lab-e-Goya / Lips that Speak* in 1969, the Best Translation Award from Columbia University, the UNESCO Prize for Children's Literature for her series of children's stories, the Mandela Prize in 1997, and the award of Sitara-e-Imtiaz by the Government of Pakistan in 2000. She regularly writes columns for the daily *Jang* newspaper on current issues of political, social, and literary importance, which were collected in *Warq Warq Aaina / Leaves of Reflections*. Besides her numerous activities of attending national and international symposia, she can be found busy penning poems and columns in the office of her NGO 'Hawwa,' which she runs in Islamabad to help rural women become financially independent through cottage industries and handicrafts. Her first memoir, *Buri Aurat ki Katha*, has just been translated by Durdana Soomro as *A Bad Woman's Story*. The poem, "Rab se Shart-nama / Contract with the Lord," (added as a supplementary file to the online version of this interview) is being reprinted with the poet's permission from *Wehshat aur Barood men Lipti hui Shairi / Poetry Bound in Desolation and Dynamite*, also published this year.

I conducted this interview with Kishwar Naheed over the course of a few months through email. Our correspondence progressed as the situation in Pakistan changed. In her succinct responses, she elucidated her views on the venture

of writing, the location of women, and the dread surrounding the universal surge in extremism. She was very forthcoming in her responses, very lucid, even blunt at times. This unflinching honesty and clear-sightedness has been a feature of her writing from the beginning of her career, which has earned her the wrath of official and literary circles. Last year, she had written a very moving tribute to Ahmad Faraz on his passing away, one of the many national cataclysms Pakistan has recently been through. With the loss of Faraz, I would say that Kishwar Naheed has taken on the mantle of national conscience that male poets like Faraz and Faiz earlier wore publicly.

**MS: Kishwar, let's start by talking about your latest endeavors: you have been involved in the rehabilitation of the IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) from Swat. What news do you bring back from the camps?**

KN: People, especially women were distressed because of being away from home and because of the heat, which was unbearable.

**MS: Have their conditions improved since you last saw them? Do you foresee any dangers and risks these women might face in their return to their homes?**

KN: They have returned home but the danger is not over. Women usually don't come out of home, just as they did before.

**MS: Your new volume, *Wehshat aur Barood men Lipti hui Shairi / Poetry Bound in Desolation and Dynamite*, came out in the beginning of this year. In the gap between the publication of your last volume of poetry, *Sokhta Samani-e-Dil / Composition of a Scorched Heart*, you have written two memoirs, numerous children's books, compiled your newspaper articles, chronicled Pakistani women weavers and embroiderers, and co-edited a collection of literary essays for the journal *Adbiyaat*. Since your poems in the new volume span from 2001 to 2008, what changes have you observed in the Pakistani literary landscape?**

KN: Fundamentalism has affected every mind and all social structures.

**MS: Do you find reflections of fundamentalism even in the literary field?**

KN: When each poet starts writing more of Naats and Hamds, it is an obvious reflection of mental fundamentalism.

**MS: Do the words of poetry offer any hope in fighting this infection?**

KN: Not exactly, the whole surrounding environment and the media has to change to stop such infections.

**MS: In one of your notable earliest ghazals, you had written “Kuch yoon hi zard zard si Naheed aaj thi / Kuch aurhni ka rang bhi khilta hui na tha,” (*Lab-e-Goya / Lips that Speak* 86). How far is the distance between your earlier ghazal and the latest: “Pehchanny ko dost buht the, magar na the / Naheed sharh-e-zeest bhi namnak ho gai” (*Wehshat aur Barood men Lipti hui Shairi / Poetry Bound in Desolation and Dynamite* 124)?**

KN: The whole atmosphere, the events, the brutal murders all effect one’s idiom and scenario. It is not just the past few years: at first there was the worst law and order in Zia’s times, then the creation of MQM, then 9/11 took place and, thereafter, there has been continuous brutal action, especially against women.

**MS: Why is there a conscious turn from ghazal to azad nazm (free verse) to nasri nazm (prose poetry) in your poetry? The inclusion of a section on ghazals in virtually all of your volumes suggests that the ghazal holds a special place in your poetics; how do you deal with weaving between the two different forms of the nasri nazm and the ghazal?**

KN: I started writing Ghazal in the beginning. As I grew in consciousness and feeling, all forms of poetry were around me. I love to write a Ghazal in the same manner as I am absorbed in writing a prose poem.

MS: How are the demands of the ghazal different from that of the prose poem? For instance, what roles do subject matter or the length of the line play in your choice between the two?

KN: Ghazal, as a classic form, is in my blood, while I am used to writing prose poems because of the demands of the subject. I never write anything intentionally, it comes over.

**MS: Kishwar, speech – the act of articulation, as opposed to silence or oppression – is a significant theme in your poetry. I also believe that the space of houses – especially women’s position in a particular social and historical place – is an important motif in your poetry. If we take the example of your famous poem, “Hum Gunahgar Aurtain / We Sinful Women,” is there any connection between these two themes? I’m thinking here of your reference to the absence of Swati women from the public sphere.**

KN: Any woman, outspoken or not, has to take the burden of so many activities within the home, in the office, and in society. This needs writing for expression, but when the majority have no courage, people like me have to write in their idiom.

**MS: How many goals of the Progressive Writer's Movement do you think have been realized in Urdu literature?**

KN: The scene and terminology in Urdu poetry changed because of the Progressive movement.

**MS: Do you believe that there is a heightened need for the same spirit of engagement among writers in the present time?**

KN: Much more so, as colonialism has extended its structure in the form of globalization and consumerism.

**MS: As a poet who is engaged in social activism at the grass roots level, how do you respond to the charges that poetry is contaminated by access to the real, political world?**

KN: The objective of working at grass roots level indicates that change must come at the lowest level. The reflection of fulfillment and joy on the faces of deprived women makes me happy and confident that the world may change if we develop women in particular.

**MS: What do you make of male critics who say that poetry written by women poets gains attention merely because it is written by women?**

KN: Male poets and critics, in particular, have not yet been able to understand the sensibility of women writers, the way they have changed the scenario of Urdu literature. It is again the responsibility of women as critics to expand the structure and understanding of women's writings.

**MS: Your poetry, and more lately your prose work such as *Buri Aurat ki Katha / A Bad Woman's Story*, has focused on the self as embodied by a woman and the experiences of a writing woman. Do the self and the body play an equal role in your poetry?**

KN: Self is not realized by all, even by educated women. They have a similar position about their body – a majority of women have expressed that they may or may not enjoy sex, but they have no courage to express this. Both these concepts are amalgamated in my prose and poetry.

**MS: Is it a fair assessment that there are obstacles, in your opinion, between writing about women's bodies and sexuality in Urdu?**

KN: A lot more, many words in prose don't even exist. Likewise, I cannot write in poetry what male writers may easily describe. Besides the attitude against women's writing, we face many taboos in Urdu language. My translation of *The Second*

*Sex* [published as *Aurat Nafsiyat ke Ainay mein*] was banned because of the use of words describing a woman's private parts in actual language.

**MS: You have been a part of the women's rights movement, e.g. WAF (Women's Action Forum), in Pakistan from its very inception. What kind of milestones do you think it has helped achieve? Where is it heading?**

KN: Pakistani women's movement had been in reaction to the fundamentalism introduced by the dictator Zia-ul-Haq. The struggle has made the policymakers include women even at the grass roots level in political struggle. Laws against sexual abuse and discrimination of women have already been proposed by women lawmakers in the Parliament for approval.

**MS: Your memoir, *Buri Aurat ke Khatoot - Nazaida Beti ke Naam / A Bad Woman's Letters – To My Unborn Daughter*, relates your disappointment at the conditions that a young woman in Pakistan may face. Do you feel that the younger generation of Pakistani women appreciates the gains that have been made by the women's rights movement?**

KN: They do, but the dogma of a retrogressive culture and its taboos don't allow them to write in the same manner.

**MS: How is the struggle for empowering women in Pakistan different from Anglocentric feminisms?**

KN: Women of Pakistan have no choice in their marriage or profession, it is mostly directed by the family. Even now a girl of 3 years is married to a man who is 66 years old. A second marriage or any number of marriages, especially among politicians and feudal lords, are common, yet a woman is treated like a commodity. The struggle of the sub-continental women is meant for their basic rights.

**MS: You have been critical of Barbara Metcalf's translation (*Perfecting Woman: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar*) and its implications for the representations of Pakistani women.**

KN: *Bihishti Zewar* is not for emancipation for women, that is why I objected on its translation.

**MS: Do you believe then that the translator also shares responsibility in the choice and method of transmission of a text to another language and culture?**

KN: Very much so. The translator must have a command on the two languages that he or she is dealing with, and also of the culture which is related to the background of the writing being translated.

**MS: How significant have your own translations of other poets and writers into Urdu been for your own work?**

KN: No one has analyzed the translations that I have done. I have seen translations of my poetry and prose – translation is a really difficult job, those who do it well are masters.

**MS: Are there any writers that have particularly accorded you satisfaction?**

KN: Many writers like Maya Angelou or Neruda have been greatly admired. Likewise, Marquez and Kundera are very close to the thinking of Urdu writers.

**MS: Your memoir *Shanasaaiyan, Ruswaiaian / Acquaintances, Scandals* portrays a fascinating scene of synthesis and collaboration between writers and artists even in the harshest of political conditions in Pakistan. As you have interacted with various personalities from the fields of literature, painting, and performing arts and have headed the National Council of Arts, can you inform us of the reconciliation of literature and arts?**

KN: The two forms are very close, even dance or music interweave with literature.

**MS: Do you find a similar tendency towards collaboration between the two fields in Pakistan today?**

KN: Not exactly.

**MS: What has changed in the interim?**

KN: The painters have shown their craft with the exhibition “Hanging Fire,” which was presented in New York on Sep 10, 2009. An anthology of literature written on Swat in particular, and terrorism in general, has just been printed. This is the situation on the creative front. However, common people are scared of the target killings, and this is a situation that is getting graver nowadays.

**MS: Among the new writers in Urdu, whom do you find most promising and whose poetry do you enjoy reading?**

KN: Many new and young writers, Attiya Dawood is one of them.

**MS: What do you think of the future of the development of Urdu literature in Pakistan?**

KN: Even as extremism would flourish, more and more Urdu literature in reaction to it, with stronger voices, will emerge.

**MS: Since you have been traveling to mushairas and conferences throughout the world, do you hold any faith in the progress of Urdu poetry in the diasporic communities outside of Pakistan?**

KN: A few good writers, including women poets, have appeared in Europe and in America. I hope new ones will join them.

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