

Translating a Poetic Discourse: *Modern Poetry of Pakistan*

Reviewed by Qaisar Abbas

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It's a rarity to see English translations of Pakistani poetry from Urdu and regional languages in one anthology. The well known contemporary Urdu poet, Iftikhar Arif, who is also the Chairman of National Language Authority, has accomplished this daunting task as its editor. The forthcoming anthology "Modern Poetry of Pakistan" is an extraordinary work that offers a colorful mosaic of romantic, postcolonial, modernist and postmodernist streams in the contemporary poetic discourse in Pakistan.

The anthology offers 148 poems by 44 poets in English translated from seven languages including Urdu and regional languages-Balochi, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Pashto, Saraiki and Sindhi. It includes stalwarts of Urdu poetry, Allama Iqbal, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Hafeez Jalandhari, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, and Josh Malihabadi, and the post colonial generation of N.M. Rashid, Meeraji, Ahmad Faraz, Majeed Amjad, Habib Jalib, Kishwar Nahid, Parveen Shakir, Munir Niazi and Iftikhar Arif. The second cadre of poets includes Sarmad Sehbai, Zafar Iqbal, Fahmida Riaz, Mustafa Zaidi, Shabnam Shakil, Ada Jafri and Nasir Kazmi among others. The 344-page anthology will be published in January 2011 by Dalkey Archive Press from London and Champaign with a price tag of \$16.95.

However, it is not inclusion of Urdu poets but the contemporary poets of regional languages that makes this anthology an astounding work. It includes Sheikh Ayaz, Janbaz Jatoi, Tanveer Abbasi, Sehar Imdad and Pushpa Vallabh (Sindhi); Hasina Gul, Ghani Khan, Gul Khan Naseer, Amir Hamza Khan Shinwari and Samandar Khan Samandar (Pushto); Taos Binhali (Kashmiri); Ata Shad (Balochi), and Ustad Daman, Sharif Kunjahi, and Ahmed Rahi (Punjabi).

Other than the stalwarts of the Urdu poetry like Faiz and Faraz who juxtaposed romanticism with ideological rendering and connected it to the common experiences and frustrations of society, a major part of the book includes Urdu poetry that depicts the popular trend of romanticism-just for the sake of romanticism.

Faiz, on the other hand, while signifying the overwhelming burdens of the common humans and their distrust of the state apparatus, as always, is seen mesmerizing the reader:

Those who stir tyranny's poison
Will succeed neither today nor tomorrow.
So what if they have already extinguished
The candles in the bridal chamber of love?
Show us if they can put out the moon!

The unrelenting saga of our postcolonial verse with its traditional romanticism somehow isolated itself from the rest of the poetic world that was experiencing the modernist waves of ideological undertones exploring the day-to-day issues of gender dynamics, feminism, culture, sexual orientations, power relations, and racism.

However, it is not that modernist trends were altogether ignored in the Pakistani poetic discourse. In fact the anthology includes a good number of poets who were in touch with the realities of their age. These daring souls, most of the time ignoring the traditional structural form of Ghazal, dealt with Nazm, closer to the western style of verse. Included in the anthology are Hasina Gul, Pushpa Vallabh, Sehar Imdad, Sharif Kunjahi, Ustad Daman and Ata Shad who represent the modernist school of poetry. Ata Shad's poem, for instance, "Lament of the Merchants of Hope" exposes new cruelties of the market-based capitalist economy:

And in this marketplace,
You and I are sold,
We all are sold-
And the heart, like beggar,
Endures the rebuff.

Pushpa Vallabh, in her Sindhi poem, denying the artificial boundaries that divide people, looks for a single global identity of humankind:

I am love-
Don't assign me a color.
Whatever color I am painted,
that is my color.
Don't look for me in his eyes or her eyes.
I am in everyone's eye.

Similarly the poetic imagery of Sharif Kunjahi represents images of a society divided into classes and feels ever-growing sorrows of the down trodden in his Punjabi poem:

If I say that you and I are born of the same Adam,
Why then should one suffer in labor and the other rest in ease?

Ustad Daman's Punjabi poem "Partition" represents postcolonial distresses and excruciating experiences of people on both sides of the newly created border of India and Pakistan:

We may not say it but know it well,
You lost your way. We too.
Into the jaws of death alive
You were flung. We too.

Coming from the complexities of our contemporary "hi-tech" world which is consistently defining and shaping our power structures, communication patterns and life styles, the postmodern discourse goes beyond the postcolonial mindset. Today, contemporary verse is not limited to its own social or personal contexts, it's also global. A poet in this new world of digital technologies, the internet, satellite-based communications and visually created layers of reconstructed realities, becomes a profound communicator consistently engaged in a dialogue with the reader. It is the reader, however, not the poet, who ultimately makes sense of the verse and creates another world of meaning.

Although slowly, our poetic discourse is also embracing these new realities of the twenty-first century. These waves of thought are so alive in the verse of Kishwar Nahid, Sarmad Sehbai, Zehra Nigah, Gul Khan Naseer, Majeed Amjad, Meeraji, Sehar Imdad and Wazir Agha.

Sahar Imdad's Sindhi poem "Living but Dead" blurs the distinction between her and the dead herself:

These feet no longer run after butterflies,
The wrists no longer move.
The head that once lay on mother's breast
Is no longer attached to a body.
This is me, and this her third world.

Sarmad Sehbai's "Poem for Those Affected by Disaster" looks like an eulogy of victims of the recent floods:

For you, the rulers
will collect donations from country after country.
Tickets will be sold
for exhibits of posters of your dead body.
God-fearing citizens will buy gifts of prayers.
You will be publicly buried
amid gold-robe shouts.

Besides the poetic manifestation, transforming the mood and essence of poetry into new linguistic codes involves a creative process that may or may not reflect the original verse itself as Waqas Khwaja, who led a team of fifteen translators in creating the anthology, correctly points out in his introductory essay "A good translator is an exquisite ambassador." The translators have created an amazing work, with some capacity for improvement. For instance in translating Parveen Shakir's Ghazal "Koo be koo phail gai baat shanasai ki" the word "shanasai" becomes "familiarity" in the translation-"From lane to lane spread the rumor of familiarity"-which is literal, not conveying the mood of the ghazal.

Overall, the advance copy of the anthology that I have received is a remarkable poetic discourse translated in English. Surprisingly, however, not included in the long list of Urdu poets are some of the popular romanticists like Ubaid Ullah Aleem and Noshi Gilani, and some well-known postmodern poets like Iftikhar Nasim. Including everyone in an anthology of this stature is almost impossible, however, this anthology might be viewed by some as publication of a federal organization in Pakistan and even with all the sincerity of its editor in selecting poets, it might be read within the context of its limitations and an inherent political bias. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly a breath of fresh air!