

Classic Poetry Series

Fahmida Riaz
- poems -

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Fahmida Riaz(28 July 1946)

Fahmida Riaz (Urdu: فہمیدہ ریاز) is a well known Urdu writer, poet, and feminist of Pakistan. Along with Zehra Nigah, Parveen Shakir, Kishwar Naheed , Riaz is amongst the most prominent female Urdu poets in Pakistan. She is author of Godaavari, Khatt-e Marmuz, and Khana e Aab O Gil, the first translation of the Masnavi of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi from Farsi into Urdu she has also translated the works of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and Shaikh Ayaz from Sindhi to Urdu.

 Early Life

Fahmida Riaz was born on July 28, 1946 in a literary family of Meerut, UP, India. Her father, Riaz-ud-Din Ahmed, was an educationist, who had a great influence in mapping and establishing modern education system for Sindh. Her family settled in Hyderabad following her father's transfer to Sindh. Fahmida learnt Urdu, and Sindhi language literature in childhood and later Persian.

Her early life was marked by the loss of her father when she was just 4 years old. She was already making poetry at this young age. Her mother (Husna Begum) supported the family unit through entrepreneurial efforts until Fahmida entered college, when she started work as a newscaster for Radio Pakistan. Fahmida's first poetry collection was written at this time.

 Family and Work

She was persuaded by family to enter into an arranged marriage after graduation from college, and spent a few years in the UK with her first husband before returning to Pakistan after a divorce. During this time she worked with the BBC Urdu service (Radio) and got a degree in film making. She has one daughter from her first marriage.

She worked in an advertising agency in Karachi before starting her own Urdu publication "Awaz". She met and married Zafar Ali Ujan, a leftist political worker and had two children with him. The liberal and politically charged content of Awaz drew the attention of the Zia regime and both Fahmida and Zafar were charged with multiple cases, the magazine shut down and Zafar thrown in jail. Fahmida was bailed by a fan of her works before she could be taken to jail and fled to India with her two small children and her sister on the excuse of a Mushaira invitation. She has relatives in India. Her husband later joined her there after his release from jail. The family spent almost seven years in exile before returning to Pakistan on the eve of Benazir Bhutto's wedding reception. During

this time Fahmida had been poet in residence for a university in Dehli.

She was appointed MD of the National Book Foundation during Benazir Bhutto's first tenure and later persecuted by the first Nawaz Sharif govt., labelled an Indian agent and made virtually unemployable because of threats from the govt.. She worked three simultaneous jobs to support the needs of her growing children at this time. In the second tenure of Benazir's govt. she was given a post at the Quaed e Azam Academy. When Benazir's govt. toppled a second time, Fahmida was again persona non grata for Islamabad.

Fahmida lost her son Kabeer in October 2007. He drowned while swimming with friends on a picnic. This was soon after Fahmida had translated fifty of Rumi's poems from Persian into Urdu, dedicated to Shams Tabriz. She was MD Urdu Dictionary Board from 2000-2011.

 As an Activist

Fahmida remained part of social and political activities since her academic life. She got involved in students politics when she was student of M.A. in Sindh University. She spoke and wrote against the University Ordinance and the ban on the students' union during the Ayub Khan regime. She spent many years in exile in India in the 1980s during the dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq, living in Delhi and taught at Jamia Millia Islamia. She enjoyed the patronage of Indian Government. Her husband, an activist of Sindhi nationalism had also accompanied her to India. They returned to Pakistan though, quite disillusioned. Fahmida also expressed the reasons for her disillusionment with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India in the following poem:

Naya Bharat (New India)

 Awards

Hemmet Hellman Award for Resistance Literature from Human Rights Watch
Al Muftah Award for Literature: Poetry
Sheikh Ayaz Award for Literature: Poetry from Sindh Government
Presidential Pride of Performance Award for Literature: Poetry
Sitara -e- Intiaz on March 23, 2010 by the President of Pakistan

 Literary Work

Her first poem was published in Funoon of Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, when she was merely 15. Her first collection of poetry appeared just after two months of marriage at the age of 22. Other works are ...

"Tum bilkul hum jaisey nikley
Aab tak Kahan chupay thay bhai
Voh moorkhta, voh ghaamarpan jis mai hum nay sadian gawaeen
Aakhir pahunchi dua tumhaari
Aray badhai bahut badhai

You turned out to be just like us;
Similarly stupid, wallowing in the past,
You've reached the same doorstep at last.
Congratulations, many congratulations.

Preyt dharm ka naach rahaa hai
Qaim Hindu raj karo gay
Saarey ultey kaj karogay apna chaman taraj karogay
Tum bhee baithey karogey sochaa
Kaun hai Hindu, kaun naheen hai
Tum Bhi Karo gay Fatway Jari

Ek jaap saa kartey jao
Barham Bar Yehi Dorhao
Kitna veer mahaan tha
Bharat Kaisa Alishaan tha Bharat"

Your demon [of] religion dances like a clown,
Whatever you do will be upside down.
You too will sit deep in thought and ponder,
Who is Hindu, who is not.
You too will issue
Fatwas Keep repeating the mantra like a parrot,
India was like the land of the brave"
(translated by Khushwant Singh)

Her work is remarkable for its emotionally charged references to social and political injustice. She has been a prominent voice in the feminist struggle in Pakistan, where her poems both directly and insidiously erode at the foundations of male dominance. She has also published several gender equal stories, feminist translations, and some deconstruction of the criticism of feminist work.

Afterwards

After love the first time,
Our naked bodies and minds
A hall of mirrors,
Wholly unarmed, utterly fragile,
We lie in one another's arms
Breathing with care,
Afraid to break
These crystal figurines.

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Fahmida Riaz

Highness's off-spring.

These are the Bibis
Who wait to fulfill their vows of marriage
In turn, as they stand , row upon row
They are the maidens,
On whose heads , when your highness laid a hand
of paternal affection,
The blood of their innocent youth stained the
whiteness of your beard with red
In your fragrant chamber , tears of blood,
life itself has shed
Where this carcass has lain
For long centuries, this body spectacle of the murder
of humanity.

Bring this show to an end now
Sire, cover it up now
Not I, but you need this chadur now.

For my person is not merely a symbol of your lust:
Across the highways of life , sparkles my intelligence
If a bead of sweat sparkles on the earth's brow it is
my diligence.

These four walls , this chadur I wish upon the
rotting carcass.
In the open air, her sails flapping , races ahead
my ship.
I am the companion of the New Adam
Who has earned my self-assured love.

[Translated form Urdu by Rukhsana Ahmed]

Fahmida Riaz

Come Let Us Create A New Lexicon

Come let us create a new lexicon
Wherein is inserted before each word
Its meaning that we do not like
And let us swallow like bitter potion
The truth of a reality that is not ours.
The water of life bursting forth from this stone
Takes a course not determined by us alone
We who are the dying light of a derelict garden
We who are filled with the wounded pride of self delusion
We who have crossed the limits of self praise
We who lick each of our wounds incessantly
We who spread the poisoned chalice all around
Carrying only hate for the other
On our dry lips only words of disdain for the other
We do not fill the abyss within ourselves
We do not see that which is true before our own eyes.
We have not redeemed ourselves yesterday or today
For the sickness is so dear that we do not seek to be cured
But why should the many hued new horizon
Remain to us distant and unattainable
So why not make a new lexicon
If we emerge from this bleak abyss
Only the first few footsteps are hard
The limitless expanses beckon us
To the dawning of a new day
We will breathe in the fresh air
Of the abundant valley that surrounds us
We will cleanse the grime of self loathing from our faces.
To rise and fall is the game time plays
But the image reflected in the mirror of time
Includes our glory and our accomplishments
So let us raise our sight to friendship.
And thus glimpse the beauty in every face
Of every visitor to this flower filled garden
We will encounter 'potentials'
A word in which you and me are equal
Before which we and they are the same
So come let us create a new lexicon.

Condolence Resolution

(When a poet dies in Pakistan, friends often hold a condolence meeting to pass a resolution affirming that the poet was a Godfearing patriot mistakenly persecuted by the authorities.)

When I am dead, my friends, spare me the pain
Do not give me a testimonial of faith.
Do not declare, in passionate orations,
'This woman was indeed a true believer.'
Do not seek to prove me loyal, my friends,
To the state, the nation
And the powers-that-be.
Do not beg the lords of the land
To claim me at my death.

The taunts of the mean were laurels to me;
The wind and the dust were my soul mates.
The deepest truth lies far within the soul
And those who shared it were my friends.
Mounting a pulpit was not their way,
But they stood tall for me and held my hand.
You must not show them disrespect
Or try to ingratiate me with the judges.
Never say, 'Her corpse seeks forgiveness.'

Don't be distressed if I am left unburied
If the priest denies me the final rites.
Carry the remains to the woods and leave it there.
It comforts me to think that the beasts would feast
At my bones, my flesh, this strong red heart,
They would feel no need to screen my thoughts.

Their bellies filled, they'll clean their paws
And their sinless eyes will gleam with a truth
That you, my friends, dare never express:
'She always said what she had to say,
And for all her life had no regrets.'

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Deep Kiss

Deep myrrh-scented kiss,
deep with the tongue, suffused
with the musky perfume
of the wine of love: I'm reeling
with intoxication, languid
to the point of numbness,
yet with a mind so roused
an eye flies open
in every cell.

And you! Sucking my breath,
my life, from its deepest,
most ancient abode.

Kiss.
Wet, warm, dark.
Pitch black!
Like a moonless night,
when rain comes flooding in.

A glint of runaway time
fleeing in the wilderness of my soul
seems to be drawing closer.

I sway across a shadowy bridge.
It's about to end, I think,
somewhere ahead,
there is light.

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Fahmida Riaz

Four Walls and a Black Veil

What shall I do, Sire, with this black veil?
Why do you bestow on me this great favour?
I am not in mourning that I should wear it
To show the world my grief. Nor am I sick
That I should hide my shame
In its dark folds. Stamp my forehead with this
Dismal seal? If I am not too impudent, Sire
If you assure my life, may I tell you,
Most humbly: There lies, in your perfumed chamber,
A corpse that stinks. It begs for pity.
Cover that shroudless corpse. Not me.
Its stench is everywhere.
It cries for seclusion.

Listen to the heart-rending screams
Of those still naked beneath the veil.
You must know them well, these maids:
The hostage women of vanquished peoples,
Halal for a night, exiled at dawn;
The slave girls who carried your blessed seed
And brought forth children of half status only, yet
Was it not honour enough for them?
The wives who wait their precious turns
To pay homage to the conjugal couch;
The hapless, cowering girl-child
Whose blood will stain your gray beard red.

Life has no more tears to shed; it shed them all
In that fragrant chamber where, for ages now,
This sacrificial drama has played
And replayed. Please, Sire, bring it down.
The curtain. Now. You need it to cover the corpse.
I am not on this earth merely as a signet
Of your great lust.

These four walls and this black veil—
Let them bless the rotting remains.
I have spread my sails
In the open wind, on the wide seas,

And by my side a man stands,
A companion who won my trust.

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Fahmida Riaz

How long?

How long will your love hold for me?
How long?

As long as my womb sheds
Its child-bearing blood?
As long as my colour blooms,
My flesh is firm?
Is that how long?

Surely there's something beyond all that,
A place out there, somewhere.
But what it might be
None of us knows.

I journey towards that very place,
Craving the unknown

That far, that long
You will not be with me.

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Fahmida Riaz

Purva Anchal (On a train through Eastern Uttar Pradesh, India, under curfew)

How beautiful is this land!
Beautiful and long-suffering.
A shawl of buckwheat green
Flutters in the wake
Of this train speeding
Through the East.

As far as the eye can see,
Green fields and granaries.
This land is a peasant woman
Coming home from the fields
With a bundle on her head.

Home?
Where angry vultures wheel
Over the rooftops and threaten to lunge,
Any minute, in any direction

The grass is wet with dew,
Unless my tear-glazed eyes
See only tears.

Brick and stone
Reduced to rubble.
Mosque and temple
Still locked
In the same old squabble.
Every brow
Disfigured by a frown.

A son of this land,
Laid long ago to rest,
Wakens now
To bring you peace.

Listen to Kabir,
Who pleads with you:

Wars of hatred
Do no honour to God.
Both Ram and Rahim
Will shun a loveless land.

Near a bamboo grove
Across the unruffled River Sarju
By a lotus pond thick with bloom
Stands a Buddha tablet
A message from the wise.

'When two are locked in conflict
And ready to lose their lives,
Neither can win in the end,
Unless both do—and equally.

A battle lost by either
Will be fought and refought
Until both are destroyed
And both are equal losers.'

Such are the paradigms of war,
Such the insight of the Buddha.
Why are we, his heirs, so blind?

The Pandit and the Mullah
Are flattered and hung with garlands
And feasted and housed like lords,
While you dear people of the land
Are drowned every time
In the bloodbaths they inspire.

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Fahmida Riaz

She Is A Woman Impure

She is a woman impure
imprisoned by her flowing blood
in a cycle of months and years.
Consumed by her fiery lust,
in search of her own desire,
this mistress of the devil
followed his footsteps
into a destination obscure
unmarked, unmapped before,
that union of light and fire
impossible to find.

In the heat of her simmering passion
her breasts have ripped
By each thorn on the wayside
every membrane of her body ripped.
No veil of shame conceals her body
No trace it bears of sanctity

But, O Ruler of land and oceans,
Who has seen this before?
Everywhere your command is supreme
Except over this woman impure
No prayer crosses her lips
No humility touches her brow.

Fahmida Riaz

The soft fragrance of my Jasmine

The soft fragrance of my jasmine
Floats on the breeze
Plays with the hand of the wind,
Is setting off in search of you.

The soft fragrance of my jasmine
Has curled around my wrists,
My arms, my throat.
It has woven chains about me.

It lurks in the fogging night,
Seeps through the darkening cold.
Rustling through the leafy thicket,
It's setting off in search of you.

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Fahmida Riaz

Vital Statistics

You
have measured me,
waist, hips, breast,
and all the rest.

The curves
held a heart
and the round skull
a brain.

If I'm valued
just by the inch,
why do you shrink
from tit for tat,

When I start
to measure
some of your
parts?

Translated by Patricia L. Sharpe

Fahmida Riaz