

Classic Poetry Series

Kishwar Naheed
- poems -

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Kishwar Naheed(1940)

Kishwar Naheed (Urdu: کیشوار ناہید), Sitara-e-Imtiaz is an Urdu poet from Pakistan known for her pioneering feminist poetry.

 Life and Family

Born in 1940 in a Syed family of Bulandshahr, India, Kishwar was a witness to the violence (including rape and abduction of women) associated with partition, and herself moved with her family to Pakistan in 1949.

Kishwar had to fight to receive an education at a time when women did not go to school; she studied at home and obtained a high school diploma through correspondence courses, but went on to receive a masters degree in Economics from Punjab University, Lahore.

Kishwar was married to Poet Yousuf Kamran, raised two sons with him as a working woman, and then continued to support her family after his death in the Eighties.

 Works

Kishwar Naheed held administrative roles in various national institutions. She was Director General of Pakistan National Council of the Arts before her retirement. She also edited a prestigious literary magazine Mahe naw and founded an organisation Hawwa (Eve) whose goal is to help women without an independent income become financially independent through cottage industries and selling handicrafts.

Kishwar has published six collections of poems between 1969 and 1990. She also writes for children and for the daily Jang, a national newspaper.

Her poetry has been translated into English and Spanish and her famous poem We Sinful Women gave its title to a ground breaking anthology of contemporary Urdu feminist poetry translated and edited by Rukhsana Ahmad published in London by The Women's Press in 1991.

 Awards

Adamjee Prize of Literature on Lab-e-goya (1969)

UNESCO Prize for Children's Literature on Dais Dais Ki Kahanian

Best Translation award of Columbia University
Mandela Prize (1997)
Sitara-e-Imtiaz (2000)

A Palace Of Wax

Before I ever married
my mother
used to have
nightmares.
Her fearful screams shook me
I would wake her, ask her
'What happened?'
Blank-eyed she would stare at me.
She couldn't remember her dreams.

One day a nightmare woke her
but she did not scream
She held me tight in silent fear
I asked her
'What happened?'
She opened her eyes and thanked the heavens
'I dreamt that you were drowning'.
She said,
'And I jumped into the river to save you'.

That night she lightning
killed our buffalo and my fiance.

Then one night my mother slept
And I stayed up
Watching her open and shut her fist
She was trying to hold on to something
Failing, and willing herself to hold on again.

I woke her
But she refused to tell me her dream.

Since that day
I have not slept soundly.
I moved to the other courtyard.

Now I and my mother both scream
through our nightmares.

And if someone asks us
we just tell them
we can't remember our dreams.

[Translated from urdu to english by Rukhsana Ahmed]

Kishwar Naheed

Anticlockwise

Even if my eyes become the soles of your feet
even so, the fear will not leave you
that though I cannot see
I can feel bodies and sentences
like a fragrance.

Even if, for my own safety, I rub my nose in the dirt till it becomes invisible
even so, this fear will not leave you
that though I cannot smell
I can still say something.

Even if my lips, singing praises of your godliness
become dry and soulless
even so, this fear will not leave you
that though I cannot speak
I can still walk.

Even after you have tied the chains of domesticity,
shame and modesty around my feet even after you have paralysed me
this fear will not leave you
that even though I cannot walk
I can still think.

Your fear of my being free, being alive
and able to think might lead you, who knows, into what travails.

[Translated from urdu to english by Rukhsana Ahmed]

Kishwar Naheed

Censorship

In those times when the camera could not freeze
tyranny for ever

only untill those times
should you have written
that history
which describes tyranny as valour.

Today, gazing at scenes
transferred on celluloid
one can guage
what the scene is like
and the sound
when trees are uprooted from the hillsides.

whether you are happy or sad
you must breathe
whether your eyes are open or closed
the scene,its imprint on the mind
does not change.

The trees that stands in the river
alway remain wooden
cannot become a crocodile.

For a long time now;
we have stood
on the rooftops of stories
believing this city is ours

The earth beneath the foundations has sunk
bu t even now we stand
on the rooftops of stories
assuming life to be
the insipid afternoon's wasted alleyways
with their shattered bricks
and gapping fissures.

Ghazal

Suspicion consumed me
As it does to this day

Lined by desire
I hid the wounds in my heart

You make it all end in tears
Values are abandoned

As if a thorn were pulled out of my heart
Tears spill from my eyes

Lights still burn but the place is deserted
Once faith was unshakeable

A head of snow at my shoulder
Once we were a tongue of flame

Loneliness is my twin
Were there ever such twins before?

[Translated by Nuzhat Jabinh]

Kishwar Naheed

Talking To Myself

Punish me for I've written the significance of the dream
in my own blood written a book ridden with an obsession
Punish me for I have spent my life sanctifying the dream of the future
spent it enduring the tribulations of the night
Punish me for I have imparted knowledge and the skills of the sword to the
murderer and demonstrated the power of the pen to the mind
Punish me for I have been the challenger of the crucifix of hatred
I'm the glow of torches which burn against the wind
Punish me for I have freed womanhood from the insanity of the deluded night
Punish me for if I live you might lose face
Punish for if my sons raise their hands you will meet your end
If only one sword unsheaths itself to speak you will meet your end
Punish me for I love the new life with every breath
I shall live my life and shall doubly live beyond my life
Punish me for then the sentence of your punishment will end.

[Translated from urdu to english by Rukhsana Ahmed]

Kishwar Naheed

The Grass Is Really Like Me

The grass is also like me
it has to unfurl underfoot to fulfil itself
but what does its wetness manifest:
a scorching sense of shame
or the heat of emotion?

The grass is also like me
As soon as it can raise its head
the lawnmower
obsessed with flattening it into velvet,
mows it down again.
How you strive and endeavour
to level woman down too!
But neither the earth's nor woman's
desire to manifest life dies.
Take my advice: the idea of making a footpath was a good one.

Those who cannot bear the scorching defeat of their courage
are grafted on to the earth.
That`s how they make way for the mighty
but they are merely straw not grass
-the grass is really like me.

[Translated from urdu to english by Rukhsana Ahmed]

Kishwar Naheed

We Sinful Women

It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns

who don't sell our lives
who don't bow our heads
who don't fold our hands together.

It is we sinful women
while those who sell the harvests of our bodies
become exalted
become distinguished
become the just princes of the material world.

It is we sinful women
who come out raising the banner of truth
up against barricades of lies on the highways
who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold
who find that tongues which could speak have been severed.

It is we sinful women.
Now, even if the night gives chase
these eyes shall not be put out.
For the wall which has been razed
don't insist now on raising it again.

It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns

who don't sell our bodies
who don't bow our heads
who don't fold our hands together.

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