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Abstract

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Kishwar Naheed and her Poetry

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Perhaps Kishwar Naheed can best be introduced by repeating two things her friends have had to say about her. Some time ago, a friend and fellow poet Zahid Dar touched a chord in Kishwar's many, many friends and admirers when he called her 'The Phoolan Devi of poetry'! Phoolan Devi is of course the noted 'Bandit Queen' of India who led a troop of actual bandits for many years and still stands accused of many crimes. Yet she has so caught the imagination of the people that she has gained a public pardon for her alleged crimes and been elected member of parliament.

Later on when some of the friends, including Zahid, got together to offer Kishwar written tributes, they called the volume 'Naye Zamanay Ki Birhan'. That needs some explaining. 'Birhan' is an Urdu/Hindi word meaning a lamenting woman; but, with frequent use in poetry, it has taken on the more serious and more profound sense of a Cassandra and a Niobe rolled into one. And so the title of the book refers to her as 'Niobe for a New Age'.

The first tribute recognizes her energy, dynamism and great effectiveness as one of the leading activists for every good cause, in particular the cause of women; the second recognizes the role she has assumed as the most significant poetic voice in the struggle of Pakistani women for their rights, a struggle which reached monumental proportions during the years of dictatorship and came to symbolize the larger national struggle against the imposed tyranny.

The three poems I have selected for translation - on pure instinct, I might add - seem, without design, to mirror the three major aspects of Kishwar's poetry. 'The Palace of Wax' is a sort of prologue, with its very delicate and very understated image of the oriental woman and her centuries-old legacy of meek acceptance. 'The Land of the Burning Sun' is Kishwar the oriental woman woken from her sleep, it is Kishwar the activist, the protester, the anti-colonial, the feminist whose meek acceptance has been transformed into awareness and pride and a passion. And the third, 'The Prayer of the Unborn', is just the sort of poem that defines Kishwar's place right at the forefront of the movement - for her poetry is very much the poetry of protest and of lament, and yet the protest has come to encompass all the issues which are the concern of thinking people today. And it always, always leads to a soaring hope!
THE PALACE OF WAX

Before I was betrothed
my mother would cry out in her sleep
and that would wake me
and I would wake her too and ask her what ailed her
and she would stare out with empty eyes

She could never remember her dreams

And then one night she did not cry out
and she held me to her in her fear
and when I asked her
she opened her eyes and said a silent prayer
'I dreamt that you were drowning
and I plunged into the rushing waters to save you'.

And that night lightning struck
and my cow and my fiancé were burnt.

Then one night she was asleep and I was still awake and I saw
she was opening and clenching her fist over and over
and it seemed she wished to grasp something
then tired of trying
then gathered up her courage and tried again

So I woke her
but she did not tell me her dream
and that was when I lost my sleep too

And then I came to live in another house
and my mother and I both cry out in our sleep
and if someone asks, we tell them,
'We cannot remember our dreams!'
THE LAND OF THE BURNING SUN

My land is the land of the burning sun
perhaps that is why my hands are so warm
and my feet are so blistered
and my being is so covered with sores

My land is the land of the burning sun
and that is why the roof of my home melted and fell
and the walls are so hot that they singe everything they touch

My land is the land of the burning sun
is that why my children always thirst?
and why I am always kept uncovered?

My land is the land of the burning sun
perhaps that is why we never know of the gathering of the clouds
nor of the passing of the deluge
for my fields are ever laid waste
now by the money-lenders, now by wild beasts and now by calamities
and sometimes also by self-proclaimed masters

Do not teach me to hate my own land of the burning sun
for the same sun dries my washing in my courtyard
and bears me a harvest of gold in the field

Let me quench my thirst at the rivers
and rest in the shade of the shady trees
let me make a garment of the soil and a covering of the dust

I do not like the lengthening shadows of the evening
for I have seen the glory of the rising sun
as it comes to spread its bounties across my land

And the sun is mine
and yours too
but in different ways
For I walk hand in hand with the burning sun.
THE PRAYER OF THE UNBORN

Even before I am born – hear my voice

There are those who dip the rose in the saffron hue of bitterness and imprison the truth in the false tablets of stone

Do not let them see me

And before I am born – will you give me this assurance
My ears will not be filled with words of a heathen faith
my mother will not go in shame for having borne a daughter
and the walls that men raise will be my home and not my prison
and my being and swaddling cloth
will not be used to write the saga of homelessness and want

And before I am born – will you seek for me
the sweet water – for which my forefathers toiled with the sweat of their brow
and green grass – fragrant with the fragrance of my soil
and shady trees – whose shade will be the doorway of my peace
and blue skies – whose infinite expanse will be my refuge
and the birds – whose very being will be my contentment

And before I am born – will you forgive me
all the sins which in this blighted forest
they will commit in my name and in the name of my time
wherein they will call my words and my thoughts
the affliction of age
and which they will commit
to fill out their empty days

And before I am born – will you teach me
to recall the verdant gold of the paddy fields
so I will not earn my bread in shame
... teach me to remember
how to use my lips only to articulate
the truth within me
... teach me how to feel
the ties which tie myself to my fellow men
... teach me so to smile
that the radiance will banish forever the darkness of the night

Hear me – for I am unborn yet
There are those who think themselves gods
in their own tyranny and greed ...

Do not let them near me
but gather up some tatter from some tattered being
and make of it my mantle

And before I am born – will you make me a promise

you will not take me to the water
which floods the dwellings and does not water the fields
you will not show me the sunlight
which nourishes the harvests of hunger
you will keep me from the elders who trade even in their prayers
you will not give me a home in the town
where people walk like skulking thieves in their own city

And before I am born – will you promise me
that I will not be born an old man
that you will not rob me of the innocence of my childhood.