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Kishwar Naheed

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**Kishwar Naheed and her Poetry COMMENTARY AND TRANSLATION FROM URDU  
BY SHOAIB HASHMI**

**Abstract**

THE PALACE OF WAX, THE LAND OF THE BURNING SUN, THE PRAYER OF THE UNBORN

## Kishwar Naheed and her Poetry

COMMENTARY AND TRANSLATION FROM URDU BY SHOAI B HASHMI

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.