

Prof. Frances W. Pritchett
Middle East Languages and Cultures
609 Kent Hall, Columbia University
New York, New York 10027

**AN ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN URDU POETRY
VOLUME I**

Edited by
Baidar Bakht & Kathleen Grant Jaeger

Translated by
Kathleen Grant Jaeger & Baidar Bakht

Foreword by
Khushwant Singh

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	xi
TRANSLATORS' NOTE	xv
MAKHDOOM MOHI-UD-DEEN (1908 - 1969)	
The Darkness	2
Imprisonment	6
The Land of Moon and Stars	10
Love Child	14
Rendez-vous	18
N. M. RASHED (1910 - 1975)	
At the Window	24
What Tangles are We Trying to Unravel?	30
Introduction	34
Life -- an Old Crone	38
Frightened of Life?	40
The New Man	44
FAIZ AHMED FAIZ (1911 -)	
Darling, Don't Ask Me for the Same Love Again	50
The Dogs	54
The Highway	56
The Morning of Freedom	58
The Pain will Emerge Softly	62
There is No Remedy Now, You Say	68

The Blackout	72
Do What You Feel Like Doing	76
Beggars on the Door-Step of Hope	80
Loved a Little, Worked a Little	82
MEERAJI (1912 - 1949)	
Singular Waves of Joy	86
The Tall Building	90
Later Flight	98
Call of the Sea	104
Within and Without	108
ALI SARDAR JAFRI (1913 -)	
On Mount Sinai	112
More Beautiful	120
My Journey	124
Remarks made in Passing	132
A Morsel	134
Two Lamps	136
Don't Look at Me so Fondly	140
Murder of the Sun	142
A Hymn to Hands	148
Your Eyes	156
Daughter of the Sea	162
AKHTAR-UL-IMAN (1915 -)	
The Mosque	172
Confidence	178
Creation	180
The Boy	182
To the Elusive Life	190
Daughter of Time	194
Return - a Montage	196
The Grave	206
The Man Who Loved Misery	210

Remedy	214
In Search of a Poem	216
Ancient Relics	220
MUNIB-UR-REHMAN (1924 -)	
Apprehension	226
The Ruin	228
Rendez-vous	230
The Sea	232
The Beginning and the End	236
The Voice of Man	238
The Tempest	242
The Banyan Tree	244
Tall Buildings	246
The Aboriginal Dance	248
The Obscure City	250

FOREWORD

Outside the groves of academe few people in the western world would be aware of a language called Urdu. Even amongst the academics with literary pretensions only a few would know of its rich literary heritage and the excellence of its exalted poets. They are not to be blamed as translations from Urdu to English are a recent phenomenon and largely confined to classical Urdu poetry. In 1968 Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam introduced Mir, Sauda and Mir Hassan to the West (*Three Mughal Poets* - Allen and Unwin) and five years later the distinguished novelist, Ahmed Ali, produced an anthology of Urdu poetry *The Golden Tradition* (Columbia University Press) with selected translations of 15 eminent poets. Except for translations of the works of Allama Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz little else was available to the non-Urdu world.

Urdu defies definition. Literally the word means 'camp' - the language used in the cantonments of the Muslim rulers of Delhi. Its spoken form was Hindustani - a melange of Hindi and Braj dialects spoken by the Hindus inhabiting regions around Delhi and Western Uttar Pradesh, and Arabic, Turki and Persian spoken by the soldiers of the Muslim conquerors of India. As it spread southwards, it absorbed a lot of Telegu and came to be known as Deccani Urdu. Hindus continued to write this language in Devnagari, Muslims in the Arabic script. The Hindustani-Urdu spoken and written by Hindus tended to have more words from Sanskrit, Hindi and Brajbhasha. The same Hindustani-Urdu spoken by Muslims tended to use more Arabic, Turki and Persian vocabulary. However, by the 13th century we had a poet like Amir Khusrau (1253 - 1325) who was at home with the different

nuances of Hindustani and wrote with equal facility in all of them. Hence Amir Khusrau is generally regarded as the first eminent poet of the Urdu language.

However, Urdu poetry in the form that we know today was developed in the later years of the 18th century under the patronage of Mughal Emperors based in Delhi and Agra after their empire had begun to decline. Since Persian had by then become the language of the Court and the nobility on whose endowments most poets lived, Persian conventions and conceits stamped themselves indelibly on Urdu poetry. It attained its full bloom when the kingdom of the Mughals extended to a little more than seven miles around the ramparts of the Red Fort of Delhi. The invasion of Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah Abdali dealt the Mughal dynasty blows from which it was never able to recover. It was in these times that Mir Taqi Mir flourished as did many other poets who had fled for safety to Lucknow or Hyderabad Deccan. Even after the British occupied Delhi in 1903 Urdu continued to flourish and even attracted English and French army officers to try their hands at composing Urdu verse. Samples of these efforts can be found in a delightful little book *Dilli Ki Aakhri Shamaa* translated by Miss Akhtar Quamber (Orient Longmans). It was at the time of the Great Indian rebellion of 1857 against British occupation that Urdu produced its greatest poet, Asadullah Khan Ghalib. Two other great names slightly senior to Ghalib in years but somewhat less in literary status were Zauq and the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar.

The introduction of English inevitably exposed Urdu writers to European influences. This was more evident in the content than in the form of their compositions. Even the best of them like Momin, Dagh, Hali and Iqbal regarded taking liberties with the strict patterns of form and meter laid down by earlier poets as sacrilege. However, in the due course the younger generation of Urdu poets liberated themselves from the shackles of rhyme to express their thoughts more freely in *verse libre*. One can sense the influence of poets like T. S. Eliott, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman and others in some of their compositions.

Undoubtedly, Urdu had to pay a heavy price for modernisation.

All its most popular forms, the *ghazal*, the *qaseeda* (eulogy), *mathnavi* (epic poem), and *marthia* (elegy) were meant to be recited or chanted (*taran-num*) at poetic symposia (*mushairas*) and hence considerable emphasis was placed on the music of the words. Thus we have two features unique to the most popular form of Urdu poetry, the *ghazal*. The opening couplet (*matla*) sets the tone and pattern of the verse that follow. This is so even when there is no writing of thought or theme in the composition and every couplet stands independently on its own. Let me illustrate the role of *matla* from a very popular *ghazal* by Jigar Muradabadi

*Dil men kisi ke rab kiye ja raba hoon mein
Kitna baseen gunah kiye ja raba hoon mein.*

In somebody's heart I keep making my way
What a beautiful sin am I committing in this way!

The *matla* has as its *radeef* the last five words *kiye ja raba hoon mein* repeated in both the first and the second lines. At the same time there is the internal rhyming pattern set by *rab* in the first and *gunah* in the second line. This is followed strictly in the couplets that follow, e.g.:

*Mujh se lage hain ishq ki azmat ko char chand
Khud husn ko gavah kiye ja raba hoon mein.*

I have added lustre of many moons to my love,
I have made beauty herself witness to my deeds.

The other convention found in Urdu poetry is in the the last couplet (*maqta*) in which the poet introduces his name while summing up his *ghazal*, e.g.:

*Hum ko ma'loom hai jannat ki haqeeqat lekin,
Dil ke kbush rakhne ko Ghalib yeh kbayal acbchha hai.*

We know the truth about paradise
But O Ghalib it's a thought to beguile the mind.

In a *magta* the poet Asghar sums up the essence of the *ghazal*:

*Asghar ghazal men chahiye vob moj-e-zindagi
Jo husn hai buton men, jo masti sharab men.*

O Asghar, what a *ghazal* needs is the turbulence of the waves of life
The beauty that dwells in the beauteous one,
The headliness that dwells in wine.

Apart from the work of Faiz Ahmed Faiz little of contemporary Urdu poetry has come to the notice of the west. This makes the the endeavours of Baidar Bakht and Kathleen Grant Jaeger very significant. Since Urdu is one language that Pakistan and India share in common, they have very sensibly selected works of the leading poets of both countries for their first anthology. They have also been wise in printing only those compositions that could be better put across in the English language than their more popular compositions.

Lovers of Urdu poetry may crib at the choice of poets and their works -- all compilers of anthologies are exposed to charges of indulging in personal preferences -- but this should not be held against the translator-editors of this volume. All we have to advert to is whether or not they have been able to capture the flavour of the original in their translations. I think they have.

Khushwant Singh

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

This anthology represents a collaborative effort covering several years. In preparing these translations of modern Urdu poetry we have had the good fortune to be aided by the help and criticism of the translations of their own works so generously afforded us by Ali Sardar Jafri, Akhtar-ul-Iman and Munib-ur-Rehman. To their patient encouragement and the careful review that Shams-ur-Rahman Faruqi has given our versions of the Makhdoom, Rashed, Faiz and Meeraji poems is due much of any success readers may feel our attempts have achieved. We are grateful as well to Gopi Chand Narang for his comments during the early stages of our work, and, in particular, for his care in seeing the book through the press.

All the translations that appear in the anthology reflect one common purpose: to capture as best as we could the individual tone, mood and spirit of each poem, and so go to the heart of what we felt the poet wished to convey. Accordingly, we have sometimes allowed ourselves what will seem to Urdu scholars very generous license in the rendering of individual expressions, especially where the language of the Urdu metaphor had no natural counterpart in the English poetic idiom. Throughout, we have sought effective equivalents rather than scrupulously literal translations. In our view, only through this technique could we have any chance of suggesting to the non-Urdu reader the beauty, force and suppleness that characterize the best of modern Urdu poetry,

Kathleen Grant Jaeger
Baidar Bakht