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NEW STANDARD BEARERS OF PROGRESSIVE URDU POETRY

*The Feminist Poets*⁸²

Anyone who is familiar with the field of Urdu poetry will readily recognize and acknowledge that it is extremely gendered. This gendering works at two levels. First, most of the poets are men; virtuosity in verse is still considered to be a male purview and women poets, even well-known ones, continue to be marginalized. Second, the predominant themes and metaphors of this genre assume the poet-as-male (and consequently the reader-as-male) and revolve around the themes of the beauty of the beloved, the plight of the lover and the pains of unrequited love. Women feature mostly as an abstraction and as the object of the male protagonist's desire⁸³. As Rukhsana Ahmad points out in her introduction to *Beyond Belief* (the first collection of feminist poetry published in Pakistan), '(t)he bulk of published Urdu poetry is still love poetry bound in the old traditional idioms and conceits'⁸⁴. These 'conceits' include the male poet as the embodiment of agency and the woman as a mere object, represented as 'a feckless beloved, who was endowed with

heavenly beauty ... fair of face, doe-eyed, dark-haired, tall, willowy, for whom the poet was willing to die but who vacillated from indifference, shyness and modesty to wanton willfulness and cruelty⁸⁵.'

The PWA poets, notwithstanding their commitment to social change and egalitarianism were, for the most part, inheritors of this legacy of Urdu poetry as well as its purveyors. In their work, a woman was frequently seen as an exemplification of beauty and a repository of purity. She was often depicted as a weak victim of oppressive structures who depended on men to save and protect her and on their generosity of spirit and sense of righteousness to rescue her from her plight. A representative example of this attitude can be found in Sahir's poem 'Chakle' (Brothels) in which he, while painting a picture of the horror of the flesh trade and sex work, offers the following plea:

*Madad chahti hai ye Havva ki beti
Yashodha ki hum-jins, Raadha ki beti
Payambar ki ummat, Zulaikha ki beti
Sanaakhaan-e taqdees-e Mashriq kahaan haiñ?*

Asking for help is this daughter of Eve
She who shares Yashodha's gender, this daughter of Radha
This member of the Prophets' congregation, this daughter of
Zulaikha
Where are they, those who sing paeans to the culture of the
East?

In their role as social reformers, the Progressives did, at times, take issue against the oppression of women and sought to highlight their condition. Speaking against the institution of the veil in his poem 'Purdaah Aur Ismat' (The Veil and Honour), Majaz offers the following commentary:

*Jo zaahir na ho, voh lataafat nahiñ hai
Jo pinhañ rahe, voh sadaaqat nahiñ hai
Ye fitrat nahiñ hai, mashiyyat nahiñ hai
Koi aur sha'y hai, ye ismat nahiñ hai*

That which is not visible cannot be Exquisite
That which remains hidden cannot be the Truth
This is not Nature, nor is it Destiny
Whatever else it is, this is not Virtue

There are also the occasional moments when the progressive poet sees women as potential rebels and agents who have a role to play in the public space and in social transformation. In a poem 'Naujawaan Khaatoon Se' (To the Young Woman), Majaz writes:

*Hijaab-e fitna parvar ab utha leti to achcha tha
Tu khud apne husn ko purdaah bana leti to achcha tha*

*Ye tera zard rukh, ye khushk lab, ye vahm, ye vahshat
Tu apne sar se ye baadal hata leti to achcha tha*

*Tere maathe pe ye aanchal bahut hi khoob hai lekin
Tu is aanchal se ek parcham bana leti to achcha tha*

It would be better if you shrugged off this wicked veil
It would be better if you used your beauty to cover yourself

Your pale countenance, your dry lips, your anxiety, your fear
It would be better if you drove away these clouds from over
your head

This scarf that covers you is beautiful indeed
It would be better if you converted it into a banner of revolt

While Majaz's poems take a position against the sequestering of women behind the veil, it is important to note that their

tone tends to be patronizing for they are essentially exhortations by the male poet to women. Perhaps the poem by a male progressive poet that comes closest to representing a woman as a subject in her own right is 'Aurat' (Woman) by Kaifi Azmi:

*Qadr ab tak teri tareekh ne jaani hi nahiñ
Tujh mein sholay bhi haiñ, bas ashk-fishaani hi nahiñ
Tu haqeeqat bhi hai, dilchasp kahaani hi nahiñ
Teri hasti bhi hai ek cheez, javaani hi nahiñ
Apni tareekh ka unvaan badalna hai tujhe
Uth meri jaan, mere saath hi chalna hai tujhe*

*Tod kar rasm ke but, band-e khadaamat se nikal
Zo'f-e ishra't se nikal, vahm-e nazaakat se nikal
Nafs ke kheenche hue halqa-e azmat se nikal
Qaid ban jaaye mohabbat, to mohabbat se nikal
Raah ka khaar hi kya, gul bhi kuchalna hai tujhe
Uth meri jaan, mere saath hi chalna hai tujhe*

*Zindagi jahd mein hai, sabr ke qaabu mein nahiñ
Nabz-e hasti ka lahu kaampte aansu mein nahiñ
Udne khulne mein hai nikhat, kham-e gesu mein nahiñ
Jannat ek aur hai, jo mard ke pahlu mein nahiñ
Us ki aazaad ravish par hi machalna hai tujhe
Uth meri jaan, mere saath hi chalna hai tujhe*

The past hasn't recognized your worth
You are capable of producing flames, not just tears
You are Reality, not merely an interesting tale
Your Being is more than your mere Youth
You will have to rewrite the theme of your History
Arise my love, that we can walk together

Destroy the idols of Custom, break the shackles of Tradition
Free yourself from the enfeeblement of Pleasure, the false ideas
of Delicacy
Step out from the confining circle of Femininity drawn around you

And if Love becomes a prison, then reject the constraints of
Love
You will have to crush not just the thorns, but the flowers in
your path too
Arise my love, let us walk together

Life lies in Struggle, not in the clutches of Forbearance
The pulse of Existence is not nurtured by trembling tears
Fragrance lies in flight and bloom, not in curling tresses
There is another heaven that lies beyond a Man's protection
Come, dance in the exuberance of its Freedom
Arise my love, that we must walk together

Kaifi's poem is radical in the way it positions a woman as a fellow companion, in its exhortation that women break free from the confines of tradition and custom, but particularly in its insistence that women not only crush the 'thorns' of their path but also its 'flowers' (delicacy, elegance, femininity, grace, and even love) that serve as mechanisms of limitation and control. Where it falls somewhat short is that while Kaifi is establishing the position of his female companion as a comrade, he demands that she shed her accoutrements of femininity in order for her to 'accompany' him on his quest. Nor does Kaifi manage to fully reject the conventional characterization of women in the dominant discourse of the time, for the woman of his poem has the capacity to produce flames 'in addition to' the ability to shed tears; her existence is 'more than' her beauty and youth.

Notwithstanding a few scattered examples of such engagements with patriarchy, none of the PWA poets ever wrote in a manner that unambiguously assumed women's independent power, subjecthood and agency. For this to happen in the field of Urdu poetry, we had to wait for the works of the feminist poets from Pakistan, particularly Kishwar Naheed

and Fehmida Riyaz. In order to understand and appreciate their work, it is important to place it in the context of the material and social conditions in Pakistan within which it was written.

The political, social and cultural milieu of Pakistan in the 1980s was defined by General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization programme, and its attendant attack on women's rights. Zia's misogynist policies were an articulation of the anxieties of class and gender felt by middle-class men during this period who resented what they saw as the increasing presence of women in the public sphere and feared the repercussions this might have in the private sphere of the family. It is perhaps a testimony to the force of these anxieties that the state's blatantly sexist policies and the far-reaching changes they forged within Pakistani society and culture did not inform the work of progressive male poets in any significant way (perhaps the one exception was Habib Jalib, the only one who participated in the famous 12 February 1983 demonstration organized by the women's movement against the 'Law of Evidence'). This burden was left for feminist poets to bear.

The challenge posed by these feminist poets to the establishment worked at different levels: first, they were women poets writing in what was an overwhelmingly male literary milieu; second, they were feminists raising their voice against an increasingly hostile and misogynist social and cultural context; and third, they were producing work that effectively subverted existing, accepted conventions of poetic form and content. The poetry of these feminists was not confined to women's issues; they were fierce critics of the reactionary political, social and cultural changes taking place in Pakistani society. However, given that the brunt of the state's retrogressive Islamization policies along with the changes they

wrought in other aspects of Pakistani life was borne by women (and minorities), most of their poetry did overwhelmingly address 'women's issues' such as the 'Zina Ordinance' (which included punishments such as stoning adulterers – both male and female – to death, and which tried rape victims under charges of *zina*, or illegitimate sex).

Not all women poets of the time chose to challenge the prescribed literary forms or themes, nor was all women's 'progressive' poetry (that which worked to subvert the patriarchal establishment) of one piece. Progressive poetry written by women ranged from the work of Parveen Shakir and Ada'a Jafri – whose poetry was less explicitly political insofar as it did not address explicitly 'political' issues, and who tended to use conventional poetic forms such as the ghazal (and in the case of Jafri, some of its standard expressions as well) – to that of poets such as Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riyaz, whose writings were stridently feminist in their tone and subject matter. However, given the male-dominated nature of the Urdu literary establishment, the very fact of a woman writing ghazals was itself subversive since it inverted the implicit convention that women were the objects rather than the subjects, or agents, of romance and desire. Feminist poets had to deal with a significant backlash, including criticism from the largely male status quo, for their 'loose morality' and their 'masculinity'⁸⁶, and were frequently subjected to the threat of violence from the state and individuals⁸⁷.

Since women were at the vanguard of the movement against Zia's martial-law government and its policies, it is not surprising that they were also the most political and prominent writers/poets/artists of the time. As Kishwar Naheed points out in her well-known poem, 'Hum Gunahgaar Aurateñ' (We Sinful Women):

*Ye hum gunahgaar aurateñ haiñ
Jo ahl-e jabba ki tamkinat se
Na ro'b khaayeñ
Na jaan becheñ
Na sar jhukaayeñ
Na haath jodeñ
Ye hum gunahgaar aurateñ haiñ
Ke jin ke jismoñ ki fasl becheñ jo log
Voh sarfaraaz thahreñ
Nayaabat-e imtiyaaz thahreñ
Voh daavar-e ahl-e saaz thahreñ*

*Ye hum gunahgaar aurateñ haiñ
Ke sach ka parcham uñha ke nikleñ
To jhoot se shaah-raaheñ atj mile haiñ
Har ek dahleez pe sazaaoñ ki daastaaneñ rakhi mile haiñ
Jo bol sakti theeñ voh zubaaneñ katj mile haiñ*

It is we sinful women
Who are not intimidated
By the magnificence of those who wear robes
Who don't sell their souls
Don't bow their heads
Don't fold their hands in supplication
We are the sinful ones
While those who sell the harvest of our bodies
Are exalted
Considered worthy of distinction
Become gods of the material world

It is we sinful women
Who, when we emerge carrying aloft the flag of truth
Find highways strewn with lies
Find tales of punishment placed at every doorstep
Find tongues which could have spoken, severed

Besides being a harsh indictment of those who sold out to the establishment, these words also directly subvert the dominant stereotypes of women as weak and ineffectual and their

accompanying ideas about 'femininity'. The phrase 'we sinful women', repeated like a chant throughout the poem, functions as a slap in the face of the religious orthodoxy and the state, referring as it does to the Zina Ordinance which uses the crutch of Islam to hold women responsible for all sex crimes.

Fehmida Riyaz's poem 'Chaadar Aur Chaardiwaari' (The Veil and the Four Walls of Home) was another explicit example of the way feminists used poetry as a medium of dissent against the Zia regime and as a critique of the hypocrisy of the religious orthodoxy. The poem derives its title from the name of the campaign started by Zia's Islamic Ideology Council, which was part of the general move to restrict women's participation in society to the domestic sphere. The poem is worth quoting in its entirety:

*Huzoor, main is siyaah chaadar ka kya karoongi?
Ye aap mujh ko kyoon bahshte haiñ, basad inaayat!*

*Na sog mein hoon ke is ko odhoon
Gham-o-alam khalq ko dikhaon
Na rog hoon main ke is ki taarekiyon mein khaft se doob jaon
Na main gunahgaar hoon na mujrim
Ke is siyaahi ki mohr apni jabeen pe har haal mein lagaoon
Agar na gustaakh mujh ko samjheñ*

*Agar main jaañ ki amaan paon
To dast-basta karoon guzaarish
Ke banda-parvar!
Huzoor ke hujra-e mo'attar mein ek laasha pada hua hai
Na jaane kab ka gala sada hai
Ye aap se rahm chaahta hai
Huzoor itna karam to keeje
Siyaah chaadar mujhe na deej
Siyaah chaadar se apne hujre ki bekafan laash dhaamp deej
Ke is se phooti hai jo 'ufoonat
Voh kooche kooche mein haampti hai*

*Voh sar patakti hai chaukhatoñ par
Barahnagi apni dhaankti hai
Suneñ zara dil-kharaash cheekhheñ
Bana rahi haiñ ajab hiyole*

*Jo chaadaron mein bhi haiñ barahna
Ye kaun haiñ? Jaante to hong
Huzoor pehchaante to hong!
Ye laundiyaan haiñ!
Ke yarghamaali halaal shab bhar raheñ -
Dam-e subha darbadar haiñ
Ye baandiyaan haiñ!*

Huzoor ke natfa-e mubarek ke nasb-e virsa se mo'tabar haiñ

*Ye bibiyaan haiñ!
Ke zaujagi ka khiraaj dene
Qataar andar qataarbaari ki muntazar haiñ*

*Ye bacchiyaan haiñ!
Ke jin ke sar pe phira jo hazrat ka dast-e shafqat
To kam-sini ke lahu se resh-e saped rangeen ho gayi hai
Huzoor ke hujla-e mo'attar mein zindagi khood ro gayi hai*

*Pada hua hai jahaan ye laasha
Taveel sadiyon se qatl-e insaanayat ka ye khood chukaañ tamaasha
Ab is tamaashe ko khatm keeje
Huzoor ab is ko dhaamp deej!
Siyaah chaadar to ban chuki hai meri nahiñ aap ki zaroorat*

*Ke is zameen par vujud mera nahiñ faqat ek nishaan-e shahvat
Hayaat ki shaah-raah par jagmaga rahi hai meri zahaanat
Zameen ke rukh par jo hai paseena to jhilmilaati hai meri mehnat
Ye chaar deewaariyaan, ye chaadar, gali sadi laash ko mubarek
Khuli fizaon mein baadbaan khol kar badhega mera safeena
Main Aadam-e nau ki humsafar hoon
Ke jis ne jeeti meri bharosa bhari rifaayat!*

*Sire! What will I do with this black chaadar
Why do you bless me with it?*

I am neither in mourning that I should wear it
 To announce my grief to the world
 Nor am I a disease, that I should drown, humiliated, in its
 darkness
 I am neither sinner nor criminal
 That I should set its black seal
 On my forehead under all circumstances

If you will pardon my impertinence
 If I have reassurance of my life⁸⁸
 Then will I entreat you with folded hands
 O Benevolent One!
 In Sire's fragrant chambers lies a corpse
 Who knows how long it has been rotting there
 It asks for your pity
 Sire, be kind enough
 Give me not this black shawl
 Use it instead to cover that shroudless corpse in your chambers
 Because the stench that has burst forth from it
 Goes panting through the alleys –
 Bangs its head against the doorframes
 Attempts to cover its nakedness
 Listen to the heartrending shrieks
 Which raise strange spectres

They who remain naked despite their *chaadars*
 Who are they? You must know them
 Sire, you must recognize them
 They are the concubines!
 The hostages who remain legitimate through the night
 But come morning, are sent forth to wander, homeless
 They are the handmaidens

More reliable than the half-share of inheritance promised your
 precious sperm

These are the honourable wives!
 Who await their turn in long queues
 To pay their conjugal dues

These are the young girls!
 When Sire's affectionate hand descended upon their heads
 Their innocent blood stained your white beard red
 In Sire's fragrant chambers life has shed tears of blood

Where this corpse lies
 This, for long centuries the bloody spectacle of humanity's
 murder
 End this spectacle now
 Sire, cover it up
 The black *chaadar* has become your necessity, not mine

My existence on this earth is not as a mere symbol of lust
 My intelligence gleams brightly on the highway of life
 The sweat that shines on the brow of the earth is but my hard
 work
 The corpse is welcome to this *chaadar* and these four walls
 My ship will move full-sail in the open wind
 I am the companion of the new Adam
 Who has won my confident comradeship

In this powerful poem, Riyaz, by rejecting the *chaadar* being offered to her by the self-styled keepers of people's conscience, also rejects the Islamists' construction of her as a sexual object that is required by the law to be veiled and sequestered within the four walls of the home. She subjects these powers to biting sarcasm by repeatedly addressing them with mock honorifics such as 'huzoor', and a series of formulaic phrases such as *jaan ki amaan paaoñ*, *dast-basta karooñ guzaarish*, and *banda-parvar*. Since she is not in mourning, nor a sinner or criminal she argues with mock innocence, that she does not understand why she is being offered the black shawl (or, by implication, the seclusion of the *chaardiwaari*). The rest of the poem lists the crimes against humanity which her addressee is guilty of, particularly the (sexual) exploitation of women through the institutions of concubinage and marriage, an exploitation that

often begins at a very young age. The poem ends with her concluding that it is he, not she, who needs the black shawl so that he may cover his own hypocrisy and shame. Although Riyaz never mentions Islam directly, it is the absent referent in her text, because it is under the *chaadar* (cover/cloak) of Islam that women have been subjugated for 'long centuries'. The 'spectres' of all these female victims who carry the stench of death are the skeletons in the Islamist's closet to which Riyaz 'respectfully' draws his, and our, attention.

The last stanza of the poem is worth noting, for in direct contrast to the depiction of women in Urdu poetry, Riyaz counterposes her own reading of women against the traditional as well as Islamist ideal of 'womanhood' and proposes a new female subject – an intelligent, sentient being (as opposed to object of desire and symbol of lust), a worker whose 'sweat shines on the brow of the earth', a quintessentially modern subject whose 'ship will move full-sail in the open wind'. The relationship between men and women is also redefined as one of comradeship between equals; this kind of comradeship is only possible, however, with a radically reinvented and redefined man – an Adam who is capable of winning her confidence and is thus worthy of her⁸⁹.

In her poem, Riyaz lampoons the normative Islamist discourse of a patriarchal and paternalistic relationship between women and men and rejects the notion of a woman as an obedient wife who revels in her role as the 'light of the home' and one who is supported by a husband who has unquestioned authority over her in all matters. The idea of an equal and companionate relationship with a man is thus a radical proposition, especially when accompanied by implications of a life of unfettered freedom expressed through the trope of the sailing ship, deliberately counterposed

to the *chaardiwaari*. It is also worth noting that Riyaz's use of words like *laasha* (corpse), *gala sada* (rotten), and *natfa* (sperm) – words not normally used in poetry – along with the explicit references to sex and depravity provide another layer of subversiveness in terms of both form and content.

Yet another poem by Riyaz, titled 'Aqleema', goes thus:

Aqleema
Jo Haabeel aur Qaabeel ki maajaa'i hai
Maajaa'i
Magar mukhtalif
Mukhtalif beech mein raanon ke
Aur pistaanon ki ubhaar mein
Aur apne pe ke andar
Aur kokh mein
In sab ki qismat kyon hai
Ik farba bhed ke bachhe ki qurbaani

Aqleema
 The sister of Abel and Cain
 Sister
 But different
 Different between her thighs
 And in the swell of her breasts
 And inside her stomach
 And in her womb
 Why is it the fate of all these body parts
 To be sacrificed like a fattened goat?

The explicit references to the female body are Riyaz's reminder to us that the patriarchal society objectifies its women and treats them as sacrificial lambs, destined to be butchered and consumed. The poem goes on to draw attention to the fact that Aqleema has a mind too, one that is rendered invisible by the patriarchal system, not merely to human beings, but also to God himself, who has chosen to reveal his Word to the world through male prophets alone.

*Voh apne badan ki qaidi
Tapti hui dhoop mein jalte
Tele par khadi hui hai
Pathhar par naqsh bani hai
Is naqsh ko ghaur se dekho
Lambi raanon se oopar
Ubhre pistaanon se oopar
Pecheda kokh se oopar
Agleema ka sar bhi hai
Allah kabhi Agleema se kalaam bhi kare
Aur kuch poochhe!*

Imprisoned by her body
She stands atop a burning hill
Like an etching on a stone
Look at this etching carefully
Above her long legs
Above her breast-swell
Above her contorted womb
Agleema has a head
Let God address Agleema too sometime
And ask her something!

The deconstruction of the normative ideals of womanhood and femininity was a recurring theme in the work of the feminist poets, who deployed a radically different aesthetic both in the choice of their themes and their language in order to challenge existing standards of public discourse and poetry. 'Boodhi Ma' (Old Mother), by the contemporary Punjabi poet Gulnar, is an address to an old woman who has been repressed by patriarchal structures of power and control throughout her life and is a defiant call to all women to reject the roles imposed on them by societal and religious norms. It is interesting to note the unselfconscious use of the English word 'symbol' in the poem, another flouting of the conventions of Urdu poetry and its formal diction. This deployment of everyday speech in a

literary piece is testimony to the fact that the Urdu for these poets is a living language:

*Aaj tumhaari aankhon mein aansoo kyoon haiñ?
...
Tum kyoon udaas ho?
Tum ne to bete jane the
...
Haai ma, tumhaara muqaddar
Bachpan baap ki ghulaami, ladakpan bhaa'i ki ghulaami
Javaani shauhar ki ghulaami aur
Budhaapa beton ki ghulaami mein basar hua
Magar tumhaare to qadmon tale jannat hai
Phir poh maagh ki zaalim sardi mein
Tumhaare paanon barahna kyoon haiñ?
Tum to ghar ki malika ho
Phir tumhaara thikaana ye dhool ka dher kyoon hai?
Tum ne to saat beton ko apne pistaanon ki
Garmi se gabroo banaaya hai
Phir tumhaare vujood mein pyaas kyoon hai?
Tumhaara vujood bhok ka symbol kyoon ban gaya hai?
Boodhi ma meri taraf in nazron se kyoon dekh rahi ho?
Maiñ ne voh but tod diye haiñ
Kohna ghulaami ki in rivaayaat se maiñ ne
Khud ko azaad kar liya hai
Maiñ is khush-fahmi se nikal aayi hoon
Ke mere qadmon tale jannat hai
Maiñ ne apne pairon mein chamde ke mazboot jote pahne liye haiñ
Maiñ ne apne haath se jhadoo chhod diye haiñ
Maiñ ne apne haath mein kitaab-o-qalam thaam liya hai
Maiñ ne apne sar se baap, bhaa'i, shauhar aur bete ki dee hui
Ghulaami ki chaadar ko noch giraaya hai
Aur apne sar par apni zaat ki rida odh lee hai
Maiñ ne apni aankhon se sharm ki patti utaar phenki hai
Aur sheeshe ki ainak aankhon par chadha lee hai
Taake maiñ duniya ko apni nazar se dekh sakoon*

Old Mother
Why are you teary-eyed today?

...
 Why are you sad?
 You, who have given birth to sons?
 ...
 Oh, Mother, your fate!
 Your childhood spent in bondage to your father
 Your adolescence under the control of your brother
 Your youth in bondage to your husband
 And your old age in your sons' servitude
 But doesn't Heaven lie beneath your feet?!
 Then why, in the cruel cold of winter
 Are your feet bare?
 But you are the Queen of the home!
 Then why is this pile of dust your abode?
 You are the one who gave life to seven sons
 The milk of your breasts gave them strength
 Then why is your body thirsty?
 Why has your Being become the symbol of hunger?
 Old Mother, why do you look at me this way?
 I have broken the idols
 And, from the traditions of base servitude
 Freed myself
 I have broken free of the false belief
 That Heaven lies beneath my feet
 I have put strong leather shoes on my feet
 I have thrown away the broom
 And instead hold the pen and the book firmly in my hands
 From my head I have yanked off the veil of bondage
 Granted by my father, brother, husband, son
 And I have covered myself with the mantle of my own selfhood
 I have thrown off the blindfold of shame from my eyes
 And put on glass spectacles
 So that I can see the world through my own eyes

In the Islamist rhetoric, women are idealized as mothers beneath whose feet lies Heaven, and as good wives who are the *ghar ki rani/malika* or the 'queens' of the domestic realm. Gulnar critiques these ideals by inserting the figure of a

woman who, despite having adhered to all the conventions and expectations of the good woman in her *avatars* as daughter, sister, wife and mother of 'seven sons', is nevertheless left shelterless and uncared for. In contrast, Gulnar offers a protagonist who is the Islamists' nemesis: modern, enlightened, educated and unwilling to accept the roles assigned to her by mainstream society in general and religious orthodoxy in particular. She is sensible and hard-nosed (a far cry from the whimsical beloved of mainstream Urdu poetry), wears leather shoes, adopts 'spectacles' to see the world clearly through her own eyes, and has rejected the realm of abject domesticity for the world of letters and the realm of intellect. And unlike the protagonist of Riyaz's poem, Gulnar's woman does not appear to need a (male) companion in her quest for self-actualization.

While the feminist poets focused considerably on the condition of women in Pakistani society, they also articulated a comprehensive critique of their contemporary social conditions. Poems such as Kishwar Naheed's 'Sard Mulkoñ Ke Aaqaoñ Ke Naam' (To the Lords of the Cold Nations) offers a commentary on Eurocentrism, while 'Censorship' and 'Section 144⁹⁰' challenges the state's repressive policies. Fehmida Riyaz's 'Kotvaal Baiṭha Hai' (The Police Chief is Waiting) and 'Khaana-Talaashi' (The Search) describes her interrogation and the search of her home by the police. Ishrat Afreen's 'Rihaa'i' (Release) is a poem that talks about how the fight for liberation from 'the mountains of dead traditions, blind faith, oppressive hatreds' (*Pahaad murda rivaayatoñ ke, pahaad andhi aqeedatoñ ke, pahaad zaalim adaavatoñ ke*) is an obligation owed to the next generation, while Neelma Sarwar's 'Chor' (The Thief) reflects on the cruel disparities of wealth in society.

In a similar vein, Fehmida Riyaz's long prose-poem 'Kya Tum Poora Chaand Na Dekhoge?' (Will You Not See the Full Moon?) uses the moon as a metaphor for truth, while deploying colloquial terminology to criticize conspicuous consumption and ridicule the subservience of the Pakistani society to the petrodollars of the Saudi kingdom. Here are a few excerpts:

*Kya maiñ ise roz-e raushan kahoñ
Ke tapte aasmaan par cheel ne chakkar kaata hai
Aur shaah-raahoñ ke jaal mein
Traffic ka zakhmi darinda ghurraane laga
Baazaaron mein
Baraamadi aashiya ki shahvat aankhen malti hui bedaar ho
rahi haiñ
Quvvat-e khareed!
Kotwal ki moonh-chadhi faahisha
Dekho kaise dandanaati phir rahi hai
Maili, sookhi maaen
Kood ke dher mein haddiyaan dhoond rahi haiñ
Bilbilaate bacchoñ ko
Khaamosh kar dene ke liye*

*Shahroñ ke behurmat jismoñ par
Plazon aur mashinoñ ke phode nikal rahe haiñ
Kaale dhan ki faisla-kun jeet ke jhande gaadte
Kal ke akhbaaron mein in ke ishtihaar dekh leta
Tumhaari muflisi par qahqaha lagaata hua
Tum apna sar takraao - balke kaat kar phaink do
Apni maqtool aarzuon ke qabristaanoñ mein
Hum tumhaari khopdiyon se ek minaar chunenge
Aur is ka koi chalta hua sa naam rakhenge
'Gulzaar-e Mustafa'
'Haaza min fazl-e rabbi'
Ya aisa hi koi garam garam naam
Kyonke kaarobaar garam hai
Kyonkar garam hai ye kaarobaar?
...
Ye ek bhayaanak raaz hai*

Jo sab jaante haiñ aur koi nahiñ bataata

...
*Hum insaan ko pees kar bauna bana rahe haiñ
Ehya al-shaikh, hamaare kaarnaame ki daad dejiye
Bahshish! Ya akhi!
Aap ke muqaddas petrodollar ki qasam!*

Should I call this the day of enlightenment and hope?
When the kite circles the burning sky
And in the web of highways
The traffic begins to growl like a wounded animal
In the market place
The Lust for imported goods awakes and rubs her eyes
Purchasing Power!
The interrogator's favourite whore
See how shamelessly she moves around
While dirty, dried-up mothers
Scavenge for bones in garbage heaps
To silence their sobbing children

On the molested bodies of cities
Mansions and shopping plazas have begun to erupt
Like boils
Declaring the decisive victory of the black market
You can see their advertisements in tomorrow's paper
Scoffing at your poverty:
You can beat your head against the wall, in fact, cut it off and
throw it away
Into the graveyard of your murdered desires
We'll make a minaret of your skulls
And give it some trendy name
Like 'The Garden of the Prophet'
Or 'This is the Benevolence of God'
Or some other piping hot name
Because business is brisk
Why is this business flourishing?
...
It is a horrible secret
Which everyone knows but none mentions

...
 We are grinding humans to produce dwarves
 O Sheikh, praise our achievements!
 Alms! O Brother!
 I swear by your hallowed petrodollar

Understanding that the Islamization project was a 'culturalist evasion'⁹¹ of the real issues facing Pakistan, Riyaz uses her poem to highlight the concerns of the people at large who live under conditions of starvation and depredation while the city panders to the desires of the elite. The poem is replete with gothic representation and a pastiche of strange and ominous images such as the kites circling a burning sky, the city as web or a trap and the pathological and almost sexual lust for imported commodities which awakens the 'whore of purchasing power'. This stark reference to the increasing commodity fetishism of the wealthy classes and the symbols of this fetish (the shopping plazas, the mansions) are described as boils on the molested body of the city, just as conspicuous consumption is a sore on the diseased body-politic of the nation-state.

The satirical allusions to the influence of petrodollars and the throwaway Arabic phrases are references to the Pakistani state's proclivity to look towards Saudi Arabia for affirmation in the political, economic and even cultural spheres, the increasing use of Arabic words on Pakistan Television, the introduction of Arabic as a compulsory subject in public schools and the Arabization of Urdu itself, all of which were a result of the Zia regime's effort to move ever-further away from an Indo-Islamic culture which was shared with India and towards an 'Islamic' identity defined by Arabic elements. The onward march of capital and the obscene culture of consumption it

engenders are depicted through the superimposition of sexuality, depravity, lustfulness and disease in a way that highlights the indifference of the system to the poor and the dispossessed. Fehmida Riyaz's theme throughout her long poem is that Islamization is simply a ruse with which the rulers defuse dissent and construct consent while dividing the nation sharply between those who have economic and political power and those who do not.

The arrival of the feminist poets in the realm of Urdu poetry signalled the beginning of a new brand of progressivism, one that took on the establishment in ways that were radical and powerful. These poets – Kishwar Naheed, Fehmida Riyaz, Ishrat Afreen, Saeeda Gazdar, Neelma Sarwar, Sara Shagufta, Zehra Nigaah, Gulnar and others – transformed not merely the themes of Urdu poetry, but also its language and its grammar. As Rukhsana Ahmad writes, these poets represent 'that strand of the progressive tradition in Urdu poetry which had in the early forties so powerfully contributed to the freedom movement.'⁹² They, more than anyone else in the contemporary period, are the true inheritors of the tradition of progressive poetry, its champions, and its trailblazers. A very short poem by Ishrat Afreen titled 'Intisaab' (Dedication) sums up the contribution of the feminist poets to literature quite well:

*Mera qad
 Mere baap se ooncha nikla
 Aur meri ma jeet gayi*

My height
 Surpassed that of my father
 And thus, my mother won

ملائی سے ہم لعل نکالیں موتی لائیں جہل سے
 جو کچھ اس دنیا میں بنا ہے بنا ہمارے تیل سے
 کب تک محنت کے پیسروں میں دولت کی زنجیریں
 ہاتھ بڑھا کر چھین لو اپنے سینوں کی تصویریں
 ساتھی ہاتھ بڑھانا

یہ محلوں یہ تختوں یہ تاجوں کی دُنیا
 یہ انساں کے دشمن سماجوں کی دُنیا
 یہ دولت کے بھوکے رواجوں کی دُنیا
 نہ دُنیا اگر مل بھی جائے تو کما ہے

دُرا مُلک کے رہنبروں کو بلاؤ
 یہ کوچے، یہ گلیاں، یہ منظر دکھاؤ
 جنہیں ناز ہے ہند پر اُن کو لاؤ
 جنہیں ناز ہے ہند پر وہ کہاں ہیں

چین و عرب ہمارا ہندوستان ہمارا
 رہنے کو گھر نہیں ہے سارا جہاں ہمارا
 جتنی بھی بلڈنگیں ہیں سیٹھوں نے باٹ لی ہیں
 فٹ ہاتھ ہمبستی کے ہیں آشیاں ہمارا

کہ اس زمیں پر وجود میرا نہیں فقط اک نشانِ شہوت
 حیات کی شاہِ راہ پر جگمگا رہی ہے میری ذہانت
 زمیں کے رُخ پر جو ہے پسینہ تو جھلملاتی ہے میری محنت
 یہ چار دیواریاں یہ چادر نکلی سٹی لاس کو مبارک
 کھلی فضاؤں میں بادباں کھول کر بڑھے گا میرا سفینہ
 میں آدمِ نشو کی ہم سفر ہوں
 کہ جس نے جلتی میری بھر دسا بھری رفاقت

وہ اپنے بدن کی قیدی
 تپتی ہوئی دھوپ میں جلتے
 تیلے پر کھڑی ہوئی ہے
 پتھر پر نقش بنی ہے
 اس نقش کو غور سے دیکھو
 لمبی رانوں سے اُد پر
 اُبھری پستانوں سے اُد پر
 پیچیدہ کوکھ سے اُد پر
 عقلمیہ کا سر بھی ہے
 اللہ تم بھی عقلمیہ سے بھی کلام
 اور کچھ پوچھے

میرا قد
 میرے باپ سے اُدنچا نکلا
 اور میری ماں جیت گئی