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Engendering the Nation: Women, Islam, and Poetry in Pakistan

Anita Anantharam¹

Abstract

In this essay I offer some examples of reading feminist agency in Pakistan through an analysis of the poems of two of Pakistan's preeminent feminist poets, Fahmida Riaz (b.1946) and Kishwar Naheed (b.1940). Rather than gesture to their poetry in a strategy of recuperation I contend that their powerful narratives compel us to reevaluate the parameters of contemporary feminist historiography and discourses of nationalism in South Asia. The poems of Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed are informed by a different set of paradigms about self and community (Islam) and at the same time reflect an archive (poetry) as crucial to feminist critiques of nationalism. They have thus been able to reach a large audience of women and articulate an explicitly feminist politics in Pakistan. Their poems necessarily take center-stage in this essay. However, a detailed analysis of the larger context and space their work occupies sheds light on how they, as feminists, have used poetry to revise subtly the complex relationships between women and men, and gender and nationalism in Pakistan.

Keywords: Transnational feminism, poetics, Islam, Pakistan, Urdu

What are the limits of feminist inquiry, or to put it another way, what is the yardstick one uses to evaluate women's agency and autonomy? If we can assume that feminism, as it has developed over the last century-and-a-half in the United States and Europe, has thrived on liberal notions of agency, self-determination, and autonomy (Benhabib 1987, Brown 2002, Freedman 2002, Mahmood 2005, Scott 1988), what standards should we uphold to evaluate feminist agency in countries like Pakistan, where notions of self and sovereignty emerge from a different set of motivations and traditions? As Saba Mahmood (2001) has forcefully articulated, liberal notions of feminist agency, which seek to locate a self-actualized subject acting in her own self-interest "sharply limit our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions"(p. 203). Alternate rhetorical traditions like Islam, for example, serve as the wellspring of social consciousness for the women poets discussed in this essay. Far from the "nativism" and parochialism often associated with Muslim women, this essay illustrates that women in Pakistan have sustained a vibrant women's movement and have articulated a nuanced feminist consciousness quite outside of liberal notions of women's agency and sovereignty. If the touchstone of contemporary feminist analysis necessitates the triangulation of liberal, radical, or transnational notions

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of feminism alone, voices of women who do not ascribe to these positions will be relegated to the “imaginary waiting room of [feminist] history” and regarded as “not yet” ready as self-actualized subjects of historical inquiry but rather, as feminists in the making (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 8).

In this article, I offer some examples of reading feminist agency in Pakistan through an analysis of the poems of two of Pakistan’s preeminent feminist poets, Fahmida Riaz (b.1946) and Kishwar Naheed (b.1940). Rather than gesture to their poetry in a strategy of recuperation I contend that their powerful narratives compel us to reevaluate the parameters of contemporary feminist historiography and discourses of nationalism in South Asia. The poems of Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed are informed by a different set of paradigms about self and community (Islam) and at the same time reflect an archive (poetry) as crucial to feminist critiques of nationalism. This is not to rule out liberal feminist analyses as unimportant or as irrelevant to women’s lives and experiences in Islamic states; nor do I want to suggest that their poems are not “resistant” to hegemonic constraints of gender, class, religion and nation--because I believe that they are on all these registers. I seek to highlight that the point is to not foreclose Islam, and the women who embrace it, as fundamentally at odds with notions of feminist agency, or dismissed because they seem to be advocating for “a movement that seems inimical to their ‘own interests and agendas,’ especially at a historical moment when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 2). This liberal image of Islam and Muslims parallels that projected by the mainstream media: more, both institutions take for granted a static understanding of the category of “Muslim” and present, in turn, with remarkable cohesion, divergent and oppositional Muslim voices, as a unified whole. This monoglossic Muslim voice is often posited in contradistinction to the heteroglossia of the “American” experience. Finally, this representation is intended to provoke (in citizens of liberal democracies), feelings of horror and outrage over random acts of Islamic terrorism, Muslim sectarian violence, and a universal conspiracy to curtail the rights of women.

The second argument this essay makes is that this monoglossic voice is gendered in such a way that women’s experiences within nationalism are noticeably absent. That nations and nationalisms betray their patriarchal prejudices is nothing new; numerous studies since *Orientalism* (Said, 1979) have made this point convincingly (McClintock, 1995; Parker et al., 1992; Stoler, 2002). This essay nuances this point in order to illustrate that because poetry has not been claimed as the archive of historical, political, and national consciousness, a crucial component of the story of nationalism and feminism in Pakistan, has not yet been told. Finally, women’s sustained engagement with both politics and religion has occurred through writing--their triumphs and failures recorded and circulated in poetic metaphors; communities are imagined through linguistic appropriation; and filial piety severed through words uttered at the right moment.

Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed have used poetry at critical historical moments to discuss intimate issues of self, emotions, and sexuality that could not, in their socio-historical contexts, be otherwise expressed. They have thus been able to reach a large audience of women and articulate an explicitly feminist politics in Pakistan. Their poems necessarily take center-stage in this essay. However, a detailed analysis of the larger context and space their work occupies sheds light on how they, as feminists, have

used poetry to revise subtly the complex relationships between women and men, and gender and nationalism in Pakistan.

Challenging Man and Community

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 paralyzed 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. (Naheed & Farrukhi, 2001, p. 58)²

In the above poem titled “Anticlockwise,” Kishwar Naheed challenges the capacity of society, God, and Islam to restrict her movement. In the original Urdu there is a palpable rhythm to the way in which the poet reflects on the many ways she has been confined and controlled by her relationship with her beloved, and proceeds to rebuke them openly. Even the title of her poem speaks to the kinds of reversals that the poet seeks to trace, playing with the rhythmic movements of ticking time but in a counter-clockwise direction. While the opening lines of the poem invoke the image of a woman bent at her lover’s feet, an image that at once invokes a *namazi* (a person who is in the act of prayer), the next line dismisses any simple reading of power between the lover and beloved. Even if the woman’s eyes were to merge into her lover’s feet, even then, the

² Translated by Kishwar Naheed and Asif Farrukhi.

poet suggests, the lover would continue to fear his beloved. The lover fears his beloved's power because it cannot be shackled by familial expectations and social norms. Every fetter he throws in her way she subverts into an act of power; even if she may not be able to see, smell, or walk, he cannot control her mind and her thoughts. Despite his repeated attempts to control her senses, ultimately Naheed suggests, he has no control over who she is—he can control her body, but not her mind.

When I spoke to Naheed Naheed in Berkeley, California³, she reflected on her life as a woman coming into her own; her shotgun wedding at the tender age of twenty to her fellow classmate and poet Yusuf Kamran; her family's disapproval of the relationship and of the consequences of giving up the liaison. Many of the sentiments expressed in her poems, like the one cited above, have come out of a direct engagement with the seclusion (*pardah*) imposed on her as a result of married life within a conservative family in Pakistan. The lines, "even after you have tied the chains of domesticity/ shame and modesty around my feet/ even then this fear would not leave you/ for though I cannot walk/ I can still think" raise the issue of an embodied resistance from within—both conceptually and literally. For women like Naheed who are committed to life within Pakistani society, resistance cannot be measured with the yardstick of liberal feminism, but must be understood as complicating any simplistic reading of how Muslim women negotiate and mediate such constructions of center and periphery, insider and outsider, writer and activist.

Poetry facilitates intimate self-expression, as it allows an author to explore sensitive issues of identity, kinship, marriage, and sexuality (to name just a few) under the protective blankets of metaphor, symbolism, and literary convention (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Narayan, 1986; Raheja & Gold, 1994). Moreover Urdu poetry, as it has throughout its history in the South-Asian sub-continent, thrives in the social sphere. It is recited at opening ceremonies, at conferences, appreciated and spread through *mushairahs* (poetry gatherings), set to music and performed in concerts, and its performative nature makes it a useful medium through which to spread political messages.⁴

General Zia ul-Haq's military dictatorship, Martial Law, which lasted from 1977 to 1988, has shaped profoundly the life-long political commitments that these two poets have made, each in her-own way. Naheed and Raiz were able to articulate in their poetry critiques of the State-regulation of women's bodies and sexualities under Zia's application of the Hudud Ordinances beginning in 1979⁵, at a time when such bold-faced resistance to the State was deemed illegal. It was seen as treason, and carried the punishment of imprisonment and death by hanging. I argue that the critiques voiced by

³ My interviews with Kishwar Naheed took place at the Durant Hotel in Berkeley, California, during the period March 17-22, 2003, when she visited the campus as a part of the AIPS Pakistan Lecture Series.

⁴ Iqbal, the poet-laureate of Pakistan, used poetry as a means to spread his vision of Islam and Pakistan during the early 20th century. So also did Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1914-1978), who wrote numerous poems critiquing Partition and violence in the name of religion and the state.

⁵ Hadd is the singular form of Hudud, literally it means "Boundary, term, limit, extreme, extremity, a restrictive ordinance or statute, castigations or punishments." John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 2000). Hudud punishments are an integral part of the Islamic penal code. Hudud punishments are meted out to people who are regarded as transgressing the prescribed modes of conduct under Shari'a (Islamic law). Some of the things for which one would face Hudud punishments include: "offenses of prohibition (consumption of drugs and alcohol), *zina* (rape, adultery, fornication), theft and *qazf* (perjury).

Naheed and Raiz, as distinct and unique as they are in their contribution to the field of Urdu poetry, are part both of larger literary movements; not coincidentally, Martial Law also saw the birth of a formal Symbolist movement in Urdu literatures, and the burgeoning anti-state, feminist movement. The ways in which each poet has negotiated her space between these movements is deeply influenced by their individual experiences of Martial Law in Pakistan. Concomitant with their distinct experiences during General Zia's political regime in Pakistan and the specific ways in which it disrupted their personal and professional lives lie the strategies that they have developed, experimenting with different modes of creative expression in order to both tell their stories of survival, and make possible public dissent as an integral part of civil society.

Under Zia's administration, individual civil liberties taken for granted under the elected populist government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were threatened. Categories of family, citizenship, kinship, work, and sexuality came under direct control of the state insofar as Zia sought to reformulate these categories through the moral lens of a conservative Islam. Zia's Islamization scheme was a reformulation of both religion and gender vis-à-vis the state. The strongest support for Zia's regime came from Maulana Maududi of the Jamaat-i-Islami party (a conservative religious party that had been formed in 1941 as an independent offshoot of the All-India Muslim League) and, although tensions between the Jamaat leadership and that of Zia's administration would eventually lead to the factionalization of religious groups within the government, for a time Zia's meteoric rise to power was concomitant with the Jamaat's (Nasr, 1994). With the promulgation of the Hudud Ordinances,⁶ offences such as drinking alcohol and drug use, pre-and-extra marital sexual relations, rape, and murder were seen as crimes against the state and carried with them the severest of punishments, including public floggings and death by stoning.

While the Hudud Ordinances would have severe repercussions for women's social standing in Pakistan, this moment in Pakistani political history between the years of 1977-1988 would mark, for the first time, women's direct participation and protest *en masse* against the state's regulation of the *hadd* (singular of *hudud*) punishments especially as it pertained to women's bodies and sexualities. The administration's means of affecting such laws involved a step-by-step reduction of women's power in matters of economic, legal, and educational representation (Weiss, 1985, p. 1). It is important to note here that I do not wish to present a monolithic idea of Islam in direct opposition to feminist agendas. Quite the contrary, women's participation in Islamic revitalization during this period was complex and often contradictory; partial and reconciliatory in approach and tenor. Yet, it would not be incorrect to note that the movement for women's rights in Pakistan has remained "right from the country's inception" in the hands of a "miniscule proportion of women" who predominately came from the middle-and-upper-middle classes of Pakistani society: these women of the "urban, educated middle and upper classes"—at least in the nascent stages—"could be counted on the fingers of one hand and almost invariably belonged to political families"(Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 55).⁷

⁶ *Hudud* is the plural form of *hadd*, which means literally "limit or extremity." In the context of legislature, *hudud* implies the maximum punishment enforceable for transgressing the law.

⁷ As Nighat Said Khan (2000) notes, while great strides were made in the heydays of the WAF, movements for women's rights in Pakistan today (post 1980s) has fallen under the purview of NGOs (5). As such, "the

In 1983, the passing of the Law of Evidence would limit and reduce a woman's testimony in a court of law to half the value of a man. The implications of such laws on women are worth exploring briefly because in matters of rape and sexual violence (*zina*) women were profoundly affected. Even if, as Anita Weiss (1985) notes in her study of the women's movement in Pakistan, the punishment meted out to offenders of *zina* regardless of sex was constitutionally the same (p. 8), since women's power of testimony in *zina* cases was inadmissible in court, the legislation of *zina* in fact had serious gender biases built into it. When women were convicted for *zina* offences there was little room for appeal; men, by the same token, were by and large acquitted (Weiss, 1985, p. 9). In fact, Fahmida Riaz's poem "Stoning" (maybe some quotes here??) makes reference to the extremity of punishment that one could receive for transgressing *zina*, namely, being stoned to death in public. Cases such as that of an elderly married couple Fehmida (unrelated to the poet) and Allah Bux whose punishment for transgressing the *Zina* Laws constituted the very first public death-by-stoning case that Pakistan had witnessed, and the example of Lal Mai, in which a "thirty-five year old woman in Liaquatpur (Bahawalpur district), was the first woman publicly whipped for adultery on September 30, 1983"(Weiss, 1985, p. 9) forced feminist organizations to intervene on behalf of all women by organizing public protests over cases such as these (R. Ahmad, 1990, p. 13).

This is why Kishwar Naheed's poem "Anticlockwise", with which this essay opened, is all the more powerful, not only because of its spirited resistance to hegemonic socio-political structures, but also because it grants power to women's voices within those very subjugating social structures of Islam or Pakistani modernity.

Of Poetry and Politics

Both Kishwar Naheed's and Fahmida Riaz's commitments to women's issues become apparent through even the most cursory of readings of their poems. But are we to understand their solidarity with the "women's movement" as synonymous with an explicitly feminist stance? If so, what are the type of "feminisms" they advocate? These questions are important to ask because the feminist movement in Pakistan during the 1970s and early 1980s was undergoing serious transformations from within, wherein women activists were continually challenging the capacity of the movement to include all women across class and regional divisions. The question of Islam and its discursive role in governing the socio-political lives of women within Pakistani culture was at the heart of these debates (Gardezi, 1994). By this I mean that women were actively constructing Islamic discourse as much as they were being interpreted by it.

Feminist scholarship about the Pakistani women's movement of this period reflects this very question, so that some scholars, such as Shahnaz Rouse (1992), argue for a feminist social critique outside of Islamic discourse, while others like Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed reiterate the centrality of Islam to Pakistani culture, arguing that "in order not be perceived as alien, there is a need to operate within Pakistani culture,

movement itself has lost its political sharpness and its energy." (5) Feminist activists find themselves competing for recognition and validation from transnational actors and in many ways have had to position themselves alongside liberal feminist ideologies to not be seen as regressive or outdated. Thus, in fact, middle-class and elite women from urban centers continue to influence and dictate the agenda for the women's movement overall which has led to a skewed perception of women's issues in countries like Pakistan (Khan 1999).

and, therefore, within Islam” (p. 52). Based on her interviews with members of Women’s Action Forum (Lahore chapter), Fauzia Gardezi (1994) argues that wielding Islam as a way to unite women across class, ethnic, and linguistic communities did not in fact get to the heart of women’s day-to-day subjugation and material oppression (p. 53).

The question of whether to adopt the feminist label or not further complicated this already fraught debate about religious discourse. What were the implications of the feminist label and what were the benefits of identifying it as a “women’s movement” instead? Gardezi’s study (1994) suggests that the Women’s Action Forum’s (WAF) inability to articulate a clear position regarding these issues has led to not only its exclusionary practices, but to its haphazard choice of political battles (p. 55). Ultimately, the failure of the WAF is its inability as an organization to reconcile internally and put-forth publicly multiple feminist subjectivities both from within and outside of Islamic discourse.

Since Zia’s Martial Law regime dealt with any affront to the state in the severest manner, Riaz’s and Naheed’s strategic use of metaphors became a necessity for translating their political visions, and more importantly, crucial to their survival. While both Raiz and Naheed found the poetic mode of expression a safe space where they could address some of the larger social debates about women and Islam, feminism and nationalism, tradition and modernity, their individual poetic voices reflect their distinct political visions.

Lovers as Sinners: Materiality and Aesthetics

When Martial Law was declared in 1977, Naheed and Raiz were 37 years and 31 years old respectively. Both women were married with children and enjoyed professional lives in journalism, in addition to practicing their full-time craft as poets. Their solidarity with women’s empowerment in both the household and workplace was manifest through the kinds of themes that they were exploring in their writing. Raiz had published two collections of poetry by this time—*Patthar ki zaban* (The Stone’s Tongue) and *Badan darida* (The Body Lacerated)—and Naheed had also published her poetry collections of *Lab-i goya* (The Speaking Lip) and *Be-nam musafat* (Nameless Journey). In addition to her two books of poetry, Naheed had also begun compiling and translating into Urdu a series of legal referendums and ordinances that concerned women directly such as Muslim Family Laws, the Law of Evidence, and Family Planning. The involvement of both poets in the public sphere of print capitalism as editors of literary-political journals found creative expression in their poetry.

The link between women’s poetic expression and politics has been articulated most forcefully by feminist poets Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. Arguing that far from being a luxury that women indulge in flights of fancy, self-actualization and political consciousness begins from the naming of it in poetry. As Rich (1984, 1986) explains it, poetry is “the art of so many others uncanonized in the dominant culture--[and it] is not produced as a commodity, but as part of a long conversation with the elders and with the future. Such artists draw on a tradition in which political struggle and spiritual continuity are meshed. Nothing need be lost, no beauty sacrificed. The heart does not turn to a stone” (p. 187). Similarly, Audre Lorde has insisted that poetry is “not a luxury” but a necessity “through [which] we give name to those ideas which are--until the poem--nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (Lorde, 1984, p. 36).

In the context of South Asian society, this last point is all the more relevant as poetry has been the medium for religious expression. In devotional poetry, for example, metaphors provide that immediate transfer out of the mundane, everyday life to the realm of the transformative, transcendental and divine (Hawley, 2005; Minault 1974). While the metaphor's referent might actually be the banality of civic life in modern-day Pakistan (or India), centuries of cultural history and literary convention allow the poet to remain perfectly safe in her articulation of subjects which would otherwise seem impetuous or insolent when uttered by women. To return to the question with which this essay opened: how can resistance be understood or qualified under these circumstances, when the poetic imaginary (and thus by extension the political) portends alternate forms of freedom outside the liberal underpinnings of feminist agency?

Kishwar Naheed, for example, comes to terms with her experiences of love (and its correlative, grief) in her first collection of poetry, *Lab-i goya* (Speaking Lips). She begins to question tentatively (as if unsure of the full repercussions of her statements), the complexity of emotions women experience within the constrained space of familial domesticity, the urban-professional workplace, and she charts the emergence of these experiences in the representational space of the *ghazal* (couplet; form of classical Urdu poetry). The second couplet of her *ghazal* from this collection (1985) tells us about her experience of love⁸:

I am disgraced in the prison of my body, you are in my capture
Bearing on your body the scars of a painless imprisonment. (p.15)

Right from the outset of the poem Naheed tells us that the power relationship between the lover and the beloved is uneven. While she is disgraced because of her body, he remains unharmed. She hides her body behind the curtain of seclusion. He too is imprisoned (*tu qaid men meri*) because he is bonded to her. But he does not have any outward signs (*dagh*: scar) of his bondage like she does. The difference between their respective bondages highlights their distinct experiences as men and women.

The emotions to which the poet alludes—a woman's dissatisfaction within a love relationship, her recognition of the double standards for men and women and of how women's bodies are abused through domestic responsibilities and childbearing—are all themes specific to women's experience.

Her use of the image of imprisonment (*qaid*) is a common poetic trope to signify the state of being a lover or beloved: one cannot help but love yet one is imprisoned by the emotion of love. The heart is physically imprisoned inside the body of the lover, which makes ignoring or denying it equally impossible. Imprisonment functions in this *ghazal* (on both the gross and subtle level) as a marker of gendered subjectivity, particularly as the feminine position is somehow contingent on an ability to ensnare or "capture" a lover, underlining female imprisonment in the body.

This couplet's poetic voice is striking in that it articulates this perspective of the "capturer" (the ensnaring women). In so doing, it departs from and simultaneously re-affirms the conventions of the classical *ghazal*. Classically, the poet speaks as the oppressed, the murdered, or the imprisoned lover in a scenario of hopelessly unrequited love, never as the captor, or the love object. Here, the poet speaks back to society and to

⁸ All translations herein are mine, unless otherwise cited.

the whole *ghazal* tradition in the voice of the idealized, stylized love object who is otherwise rarely individuated and all but mute. But she does more: she speaks as lover and beloved, prisoner and captor. Rather than simply shifting perspectives, she is interrogating who and what are implicated in these concepts.

As the *ghazal* progresses, more aspects of this gendered subjectivity come to the surface. For example in another couplet of the same *ghazal*, Kishwar Naheed contemplates the stages of the journey through love:

The journey from prayer to the purification of the self is long
Even if (on its path) you change your many clothes of necessity. (1985, p. 16)

Invoking images of the steps of spiritual questing in mystical Islam, Naheed recognizes the numerous compromises she must make and the multi-faceted personae that she must display on this journey to the self. But even as the poetic voice reflects embodied oppression of the lover and beloved simultaneously, the poetess challenges any static understanding of gendered subjectivities when she asks later in the same *ghazal*:

In whose hands are the reins of the world's activities, O God!
Even the demands of humanity have changed. (p. 16)

In the first line, Naheed's phrasing echoes a stunning verse by the mid-twentieth – century poet Iqbal, the literary figure most associated with Pakistan.⁹ In a key expression, *Kar-i-jahan daraz hai* (“the activities of the temporal world are numerous/demanding”), Iqbal takes Allah to task for exiling Adam from paradise and stresses the power of human agency. This very line was appropriated by prolific, outspoken female writer Qurratulain Haider for the title of her memoirs. Naheed's question or exclamation about the control of the world, then, converses intertextually with daring intellectual precedents. The question may be a despairing plea, but is also fruitfully read as a query about human will and free choice, one keenly attuned to the idea of “speaking back to the almighty,” or to the (political) powers that be.

The word she chooses (*admiyat*) is a feminine abstract noun meaning “human nature, humanity, civility, politeness” as opposed to a gender specific noun. If the demands on or requisites of human nature have changed in the historical present of her *ghazal* then, according to Naheed, so too have our assumptions about knowledge/power structures in the world. But it seems, at least for the poetic present, Naheed is unsure of whether the transformation of these social structures has had a positive effect or not. Her uncertainty is reflected in the closing couplet of the *ghazal*:

If sickness stalks the world, so what Naheed?
The pearls of labor have continually become scattered. (p. 16)

⁹ Muhammad Iqbal, *Kuliyat-i Iqbal Urdu* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1984), 299.
/Bagh-i bahisht se mujhe hukm-e safar diya tha kyon/
/Kar-i jahan daraz hai, ab mera intizar kar/
Why did you exile me from the garden of heaven?
The work of the (temporal) world is lengthy – so you now wait for me!

In keeping with the literary conventions of the *ghazal* genre, Naheed refers to herself in the closing couplet. She asks herself what the consequences would be if the whole world seemed to close in on itself (and her). Perhaps the closing line portends her strategy of intervening in this process—the pearls of labor and toil have always been strewn about. The use of the word *moti* (pearl) is itself an interesting image—the oyster toils through its entire life in order to produce its gift to the world, the pearl. Its sacrifice and, ultimately, death produces a rare gem for others to enjoy. The tone of the poem is thus bitter-sweet; it does not valorize the poet's own struggles to find her voice, but seems to suggest a strategy of compromise integral to her survival. In other words, she admits that her contradictory behavior and impulses may lead to necessary self destruction.

If the feminist subject is constituted through these performances of resistance--and interpellations in verse--Naheed's *ghazal* from the preceding pages, allows us a glimpse into the often conflictual and paratactic style of mediating social life in Pakistani society.

Veiled Sentiments of Eroticism and Agency

The poems in Fahmida Riaz's *Badan darida* (The Body Lacerated) explore the multiple ways a female lover experiences eroticism and sensuality—the voice of the “lover” in the poems (as in the *ghazals* of Naheed) is distinctly feminine. A woman's agency to choose and deny her suitors at will is emphasized. To class her work in the most general of ways, her poems in this collection are about love. In the introduction to the work, Raiz anticipates criticism of her book and responds to it:

My first collection was published in 1967. The name of the work was *Patthar ki Zaban*. The present book contains nearly all of my poems from 1967-1972. The nearly fifty-odd poems encompass six years. You will find this collection different than *Patthar ki Zaban*. Some people have a lot of objections to many of the book's themes. In their opinion, this is obscene, or was written to startle people. Let us consider first why I write. I do not write to shock or startle. I do not seek fame. This is simply not true. In reality, a poet narrates the self (*khud-kalami*) while breaking his [sic] head up against a wall. (p. 13)

While she may not have expected the sensationalism that followed the publication of *Badan darida*, she could not have been unaware (as her own authorial preface reveals) of her own complicity in facilitating such attitudes. She suggests that her poems are merely personal reflections because she is “talking to herself” (*khud-kalami*). At the same time, however, one cannot ignore the fact that her book sales probably skyrocketed with each onslaught of negative criticism. Towards the end of her introductory essay she asks about the possible provocation her poems may cause. Her answer only affirms the political nature of her poetic voice that she veils behind every metaphor and literary convention:

But when one is prohibited from living life according to one's heart, then why bow your head down and walk away? Why not make that place of slaughter a field of battle? Wage war until the last-breath. So, I too could not bow down my neck. My poems are such a battle as if, by reading them in a loud voice, I survived my own slaughter. From this perspective, “*Badan darida*” is a battle-cry. If by reading them people are roused or startled, then what's the harm in that? (p. 15)

In Raiz's *nazm* (free-verse) "Love, the Wanderer" ("Ishq, Awara Mizaj") from this collection, for example, the emotion of love is depicted as frivolous. The political power of this poem lies in a fundamental shift in how the poet views "love." The poet locates what love used to mean to her—the anguish or pain it used to cause her, and then moves on to voice her present feelings about love. Rather than adhering to a belief that love lasts forever, Raiz explores the extent to which love changes over time and is sometimes lost.

Love, the wanderer
 The traveler is gone!
 Not even his fragrance lingers that would give away his whereabouts
 Nor a footprint
 Nor any sign of him
 Not even bitterness at the bottom of a goblet did he leave behind
 Life remains!
 A serious laugh
 Like a thought settling in the heart
 The rapid breaths
 A snared thought in the mind, intermittently, throbs like a splinter
 And in the aching heart,
 An afflicted wound
 But it is not a terrible wound
 The pain does not remain.
 But it cannot be persuaded
 A remorseful heart
 Upon changing its mind
 Surprised itself.
 What does it know about its own self?
 Such is the human heart
 It is not a stone!
 Upon which, once a line is drawn, it cannot be erased. (pp. 20-21)

The last few lines of her poem capture the fickleness of love, and mark a shift in the poet's consciousness regarding love. The heart, in Raiz's poem, is not a stone. If a line is drawn on a stone it cannot be erased, but the resilient heart can heal itself from lost love. This neatly inverts the usual oppositions drawn between "hearts" and "stones" in everyday speech and in Urdu literature, which depict the stone or the stone-hearted beloved as immune to pain, and the lover's heart as ever-vulnerable.¹⁰ For Raiz, the poet/lover is neither excessively fascinated with love nor deluded by it; love between the lover and the beloved is mutual and reciprocated. Her reading of love suggests that even after the relationship ends, the individual can move on, and is capable of loving again. The poetic voice is one of defiance—the poet refuses to become defined by love; she has learnt from her experiences and exhibits agency to love or to not love.

¹⁰ e.g. Ghalib's famous,

/Dil hi to hai na sang o khisht dard se bhar na aye kyon/

/Ro'enge ham hazar bar, ko'i hamen sataye kyon/

It's a heart after all, not rock or stone; why wouldn't it fill with pain?

I'll weep a thousand times as it is; why would anyone (go out of her way to) torment me?

The analysis of the poems in the previous two sections should illustrate the breadth in the topics these poets have explored. The boldness with which they have sketched their visions--and this too during Martial Law--could have been achieved, without punitive and juridical consequences, only in poetry.

Raiz's Crossing, Naheed's House Arrest, and the Emergence of Transnational Poetics

In his book, *In the Mirror of Urdu: Reconstructions of Nation and Community between 1947-1965*, Aijaz Ahmad argues that the imagined community Benedict Anderson invokes in *Imagined Communities* is too vague for understanding how the Urdu-speaking literary community was recomposed after the Partition of the South Asian subcontinent in 1947. In the wake of Partition, writers in Pakistan imagined themselves as belonging to larger communities that crossed geographical boundaries and the emotional baggage of Partition. Ahmad's query into the particularity of nationalism and language politics as it unfolded within the Urdu literary community was based on his questions of why Qurratulain Haider's monumental novel *Ag ka darya* (River of Fire, 1956) was so popular in Pakistan given its "strident anti-Partitionist" stance. He suggests that the majority of writers in Pakistan identified with the character's internal struggle, caught as they were between India and Pakistan. Given the novel's ideological framework, grounded as it was in a romantic portrayal of Nehruvian nationalism, "Kemal's [the male protagonist of the novel] choice—to go to Pakistan—[could] only be seen as a betrayal" (A. Ahmad, 1993, p. 10). This is because, in Ahmad's words:

The bulk of the writers of Urdu at the time of Partition constituted, regardless of religious or regional origin, an identifiable social group, i.e., a community with a dense and shared structure of feeling, which lasted far beyond the Partition itself, despite the massive demographic dislocations in the ensuing years; that a secularist belief in the composite culture of Hindus and Muslims in India was the predominant ideological position in this community; and that decisive shifts came later. Despite the scale of human suffering at the time of Partition, in other words, the factors leading up to the Partition did not decisively break up the emotional structure of this community, even though it was demographically much dislocated and recomposed. (A. Ahmad, 1993, pp. 11-12)

In more recent postcolonial exigencies of the politics of national space and place, these divisions became fixed and "appeared to be irrevocable" (A. Ahmad, 1993, p. 12) If we accept Aijaz Ahmad's claim about the real way in which Urdu speakers imagined themselves as belonging to a community that transcended the exigencies of geographic boundaries, of India and Pakistan, then the incorporation of Hindi vocabulary, folk-songs (*gits*), regional dialects of Sindhi and Punjabi in the poems of Raiz and Naheed could be understood as working within and through these extended notions of community and nation.

Aijaz Ahmad's study ends in 1965, at about the time when the two poets of interest in this essay begin to take on writing as a serious professional career. Because I have been unable to do the kind of archival (and census) work that Ahmad is able to do in his book *In the Mirror of Urdu*, my conclusions about the path that these poets have taken with respect to the language issue are tentative and speculative in so far as the conclusions that I draw from a close reading of their poems in the original Urdu are

contextualized *not* through extant archival research, but based on personal correspondence and communication with the poets themselves. As such I fully recognize that what the poets have chosen to tell me may itself be tainted by how they wish to be represented in my book, as well as the formulation of my questions regarding their work is influenced by my own agenda of situating their work in the politics of Martial Law in Pakistan. Despite these parameters that may seem to limit my argument, I suggest that Raiz's and Naheed's desire to be represented in a particular (and distinct) way is a sufficiently compelling reason to examine the theoretical implications of language politics embedded in their poetry.

Raiz and Naheed take to task different sets of social issues in their poetry, and as I suggested earlier in this essay, based on their unique experiences during Martial Law in Pakistan, the two have reflected different sensibilities in their poetry. Raiz's crossing the border into India under the cover of night in order to escape an arduous prison term helped shape the political choices she made in India. Kishwar Naheed, on the other hand, did not *have to* leave Pakistan. Instead she became confined to the home, unable to leave without police surveillance and a motorcade to match. She reflected on this experience years later when we met in Berkeley, saying that when the surveillance stopped and the police stopped following her around, she actually felt lonely! (Naheed, 2003). A comparison of their poems from this time period reflects the divergent political choices that Raiz and Naheed made; it is further mirrored, as I show in the subsequent sections, through the language and metaphors of their poetry.

Raiz's poem "The Cloud Messenger," (Megha-Duta) is a retelling of Kalidasa's classical Sanskrit poem and a reference to the Quranic story of Hajira.

Thundering
Rumbling
He arrived!
Seated on the chariot of the wind
My cloud-god
On the shoulders of the winds
His free-flowing hair
His purple (*jamuni*) body
Spread across the sky
The thunder echoed for miles
The ground trembled
The sky recoiled
With an impenetrable thunder
It burst forth with rain
And I closed my eyes
With palms outstretched
Ran away
Touching with my body
The blue of his body

I am the daughter of separation (*hijr*)
There is such a fire in me
For me
Even union is separation
I have such a thirst

Soaked in the juice of the dark cloud
Breathless, in the moment
My heart says
This is it
The time of the sweetness of union. (Riaz, 1974, pp. 35-36.)

The first part of the poem plays with the poem by Kalidasa. In Kalidasa's version a Yaksha (banished for his misconduct) sends his message of love for his wife—left behind in the city of Ujjain—through the cloud. He asks the cloud to be gentle when conveying his message because if he thunders it might scare her (Kalidasa, Meghduta, 1973). Riaz's modern Urdu retelling presents the other side of the scenario. It is told through the voice of the woman, upon the arrival of the cloud on her rooftop. In this version, the woman embraces the cloud, infused with the essence of love's message. The blue and purple colors of the rain clouds further play with the symbolism of the god Krishna—who is blue/black, hence Krishna in Sanskrit—who is often associated with the rainy season of love and longing, and also with emotions of playfulness and sensuality.

The second half of the poem weaves in the story of Hajira, the mother of Ismail and wife of Ibrahim. Ibrahim left his wife and son in the desert at the request of his other wife Sarah. When Hajira ran out of breast-milk, she began to run back and forth across two hills of the desert (Safa and Marwa) in search for water for her son. After doing so seven times, she saw her crying baby thrashing his feet on the ground. At once a spring, Zam-Zam, gushed forth from the ground.¹¹ In the poem, the thirst that the poet feels is likened to Hajira's desert trial—"I am the daughter of separation/ there is such a fire in me."

Raiz's "Megha Duta" interweaves the stories of two different classical traditions of South Asia—Perso-Arabic and Sanskritic—and brings them both into dialogue within the space of this poem. This also universalizes the theme of love, by bringing it into a larger South Asian context, rather than a unitary religious framework. The beginning of the rainy season (of Savan) symbolizes the awakening of love and sensuality—all of which are alluded to in Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* and Raiz's re-telling. But in the Urdu version of this poem, the union is as much a physical one as it is metaphoric. There is a palpable sensuality in the poem—"burst forth with rain," "I closed my eyes/with palms outstretched/ ran away/ touching with my body/ the blue of his body"—intensified further by the heat of separation and an absence of physical intimacy.

Feminist scholarship on the "specificities of national and sexual categories" has built on Benedict Anderson's formulation and definition of "nation" as a "relational [category] whose identity derives from its inherence in a system of differences" (Parker et al., 1992, pp. 4-5). In the context of Pakistan, as Rouse notes,

¹¹ The Hajj is related to the word Hajira, and one of the rites that one performs on the Hajj includes walking back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwa, in remembrance of Harija's sacrifice. I am indebted to Huma Dar for pointing me to this reference.

Discourses of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and Islam coincide in constructing gender as a secondary issue [and] condemning in advance women who strive to achieve transformation in their personal lives. Individual experience and subjectivity are repressed [and] the collective is privileged. (1992, p. 102)

Gender is primary to the construction of discourses of nationalism and anti-imperialism, I suggest, not secondary. A gendered reading of the writings of Raiz and Naheed reveals the complicated web of social relationships based on perceived differences between men and women and their rewriting of gender is a primary way of signifying power. In looking for “spaces or places of resistance” scholars of nationalism have focused almost exclusively on prose genres—the novel, the short story—rather than on poetry; the exception to this being the works of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) and Ann McClintock (1995). If we imagine poetry, to borrow Teresa de Lauretis’ words, as a “conceptual and erotic space where women could recognize women concurrently as subjects and as objects of female desire” (de Lauretis cited in Parker et al., 1992, p. 7), we can see how Raiz and Naheed have strategically used this genre to give voice to issues of self and sexuality and to write themselves into the nation.

The voices of women have no place in the imaginings of the nation. At best, they are a secondary issue. In these poems, however, women reinvent themselves, carving out of their day-to-day experiences, a carefully constructed feminist theory of community. This is evident through use of works like “ham” (we/us), “hamare halat” (our predicament), “hamari zaban” (our language/tongue) “bibi” (sister), and so forth. More, their metaphors reflect and draw upon a common storehouse of memories and experiences which transcend political geography, national belonging, and the linearity of history measured by “clock and calendar” (Benjamin as cited in Anderson, 1991, p. 24).

Poets, Borders, and Poetic Language

In this essay I have pointed out the ways in which women have used the genres of poetry to write their stories of bodies and sexualities during a critical period in their nation’s history. Shahnaz Rouse (1992) makes an interesting observation here when she says, “Pakistani women have organized and mobilized most concertedly during this same period [and] have made the most significant organizational strides precisely during periods of dictatorial rule” (p. 103). Women’s divergent personal struggles and aspirations gave rise to a vibrant movement for women’s rights in Pakistan during the Martial Law period of the 1970s and 1980s, and women from many walks of life felt inspired to challenge authoritarianisms in all its manifestations (in the home, within the community, and in the nation at large).

So as to not collapse the poetic voices of Raiz and Naheed into a unified narrative of Islamist thinking, differences in their politics should be underscored here. Naheed’s insistence for juridical rights for women in Pakistan and Raiz’s vision of a global sisterhood are endemic to their poetic expression. As demonstrated earlier, their choice of genres in which to write: the classical couplet or the free-verse are based on the limits of each respective genre to constitute feminist (and feminine) subjectivity. Additionally, the *ghazal* is self-referential and the landscape it cultivates is enclosed within itself while the *nazm* (free verse) is often not; the *ghazal*, as Naheed has used it, is critical of nationalist (and local) interpretations of Islam and femininity while the other genre lends itself to Raiz’s transnational critiques of religious conservatism. Taken together though their

Martial Law poems sketch a portrait of women's mobilizing in Pakistan that is a far cry from the image of Muslim women (as passively capitulating to patriarchal structures) perpetuated in liberal discourse.

In the poems of Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz, a new nation is imagined—one that transcends state politics and policies—and bridges the gap between diverse communities of women divided by its geopolitical and linguistic borders. The poetry of these two women makes possible an understanding of the genres of poetry as “conceptual and erotic places” that facilitate a rewriting of nation and nationalism. In this way, women's voices can be understood as coming out of and embedded in the very political fields that define and limit them. I read the poems of Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed as places where battles are waged and won.

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