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## Woman on Left; Woman on Rights: Poetic Sensibilities of Parveen Shakir

K. Tejaswani, Ph.D.



Parveen Shakir (1952-1994)

Courtesy: <http://parveenpoetry.blogspot.com/>

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## Abstract

The article discusses the poetic sensibilities of Parveen Shakir, a woman poet from Pakistan, with the intention to accommodate various voices from Asian countries in the backdrop of writings of women on women's rights. Parveen Shakir is a woman poet who veered left to the path generally taken by traditional women Urdu poets. She wrote not only on love but her sensibilities towards the commoners and her country's status are also reflected majorly in her poems. Her ghazals are exclusively on love, man's infidelity, unrequited love and the manifestation of love by men and women.

Shakir's poetry was on love and socially relevant issues whereas her ghazals were completely dedicated to love and the effects of love on men and women. In her poetry, Shakir also voices her feelings for her country and her countrymen. Her poetry is a testimony to her fight for women's rights at home and abroad.

Though Shakir was divorced within two years of marriage and lost the custody of her only child to the father of the child due to the country's patriarchal laws, she did not allow these incidents to become setbacks to her chosen career as a poet. Her personal impediments only proved to be stepping stones in her rise as a poet.

She did not confine her poetry to the traditional modes but included various innovations and creativity in her poetry. Her poetic verses are known for originality and modernity in Urdu literature. There is a steady growth in the popularity and reputation of Shakir's modern poetic sensibilities.

**Keywords:** Poetic sensibilities, Urdu literature, Urdu women writers, Urdu romantic poetry and Urdu ghazals.



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Courtesy:

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## Introduction to Parveen Shakir

Parveen Shakir (Nov. 24, 1952 – Dec., 26, 1994) was born in Karachi, Sind in Pakistan. Her poetic anthologies include *Khushbu* (1976) - *Fragrance*, *Sad e barg* (1980) – *Marsh Marigold*, *Khud-kalaami* (1990) – *Talking to Self*, *Inkaar* (1990) – *Refusal*, *Maah-e-Tamaam* (1994) – *Full Moon*, and *Kaf-e-Aaina* – *The Edge of the Mirror*. Shakir's collection of newspaper columns was published as *Gosha-eh-Chashm* – *The Sight Corner*. Though originally in Urdu, her poems and ghazals have been translated into English and other languages. Dr. Sabrina Lei, an Italian scholar, is working on translating Shakir's poems into Italian language.

Parveen Shakir is a poet who defied traditions and expressed her experiences and beliefs in the form of poetry. The poet chose to disregard her life circumstances and set her sights on higher grounds in spite of the personal issues in her life and the fact that she comes from a very orthodox and conventional country.

Shakir conveyed the inner voice of women through her poems which confronted traditions and ripped the hypocritical male bastions. Parveen Shakir is known for her originality and creativity in thoughts and expression. She did not allow the bitterness of her life circumstances seep into her soul as evidenced by her social work. It is rightly pointed out in the article "The Guarded Tongue" that a censorship against a woman's writing "becomes one woman's misfortune rather than a cultural bias that is deeply gendered" (4). Shakir's political and personal ideals were oriented towards left and her verses portrayed her struggle for rights for women.

Shakir wrote her poems mostly in ghazal and free verse. Ghazals are a very difficult form of poetry as they follow exact criterion. They should have a minimum of five couplets that rhyme. The poet has the freedom to express more than one thought or topic in the ghazal. Some of her couplets are legendary. She uses metaphors and similes in a highly creative manner to bring out thought-provoking notions. She also is famous for using free verse which is frowned upon by traditional Urdu poets. Moreover, she is a pioneer in experimenting with and juxtaposing English words with Urdu words in Urdu poetry. Her poetry could reach many readers as they were translated by Alamgir Hashmi, a well-known English poet of Pakistan, into English.

Shakir's *Wasteland* was inspired by T. S. Elliot's *The Wasteland*, and *Benasab Wirsay Ka Bojh* (The Burden of Illegitimate Inheritance) was a translation of W. B. Yeats's *Leda and the Swan*.

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Shakir got married in 1976 when she was 24 but the marriage did not last long. Shakir had only one son, Syed Murad Ali whose custody was given to the father of the child according to her country's laws. Shakir's car met with a fatal accident while on her way to work on 26<sup>th</sup> Dec., 1994. Her untimely death shocked the entire literary world, both in Pakistan and abroad.

Parveen Shakir's ghazals are based on love, women power, restrictions on women, social atrocities, etc. The poet's verses talked about her cynical beliefs on eternal love and restraints placed on women in the name of gender, religion and law. Her poems urge women to reach out for the world beyond the man-made barriers.

### **Aim of This Article**

The alternate voices of various women writers from assorted countries should be heard as it is indispensable to pay attention to various voices in literature to get a complete picture of our society and to make amends where required.

### **The Most Beautiful Songs are Those of Pain: Themes of Parveen Shakir**

#### *Questioning the Fleeting Passion of Men*

Shakir seems to question the fleeting passion of a man in several of her poems. The poem, "Where Am I" is an excellent example. She raises the question "Where am I in your life?" and suggests that she is (the woman) is nothing but "casual tunes," or simply an exciting part of "a weekend's interval on a beach." The poem translated by acclaimed poet, Alamgir Hashmi, lists also several momentary and fleeting notions, and suggests transitory and pleasure seeking focus of man's love.

Where am I in your life?  
In the morning breeze or the evening star,  
.....  
or a moment's leave, anonymous, between the breaking of one dream of love and  
another's beginning?  
Where am I in your life? [5]

Verses filled with passion and pathos emanate from a lot of sadness. These poignant verses speak about the place of a woman in a man's life. She seems to express her scepticism regarding steadfastness of love in men. Her poems could be a reflection on her divorce. This feeling seems to be a constant theme in many of her poems and ghazals as we can see in similar poems such as "Hot Line."

***Focus on Reciprocity***

How he used to complain to me!  
So many people come between us we cannot talk.  
.....  
It is not hard for me to call upon him,  
but the truth is the voices and the accents do not have the same tones.  
The tune is the same but the hearts are not close enough. (5)

In the poem “Hot Line,” Shakir accepts the slow death of love and voices the feelings of a neglected woman. In the last few lines (“The tune is the same but the hearts are not close enough”) she also acknowledges the fact that not time alone but neglect on the part of the man could be a strong reason for the death of feelings in a woman. Through this poem, we understand that reciprocity is essential for the perseverance of love.

***Compassion for Workers***

In “Steel Mills Worker,” she talks about the dangers the mill workers face in eking out their livelihood. It conveys the compassion she feels for a common man who is the backbone of the society but whose services are not appreciated.

In “Steel Mills Worker,” the verses question the apathy of society and government. Shakir seems to be wondering whether we protect our people whose hard work is the backbone of all our civilization. She opines that the worker has “signed a suicidal pact.”

Black ghost born of sperm of coal at hellish temperatures.  
.....  
Perhaps he does not know that he has signed a suicide pact in full knowledge.  
He is the fuel for this furnace. (5)

Reading between the lines in this poem, we feel her anger at the apathy of society and government. Her poetry focuses on the negligence of the country and its failure to recognize and support the workers’ sacrifice.

***Selling Self-respect for the Growth of a Hypocritical Society***

In yet another poem, “We are all Dr Faustus,” she talks about people selling their self-respect for various reasons in their struggle to live in a hypocritical society:

In a way we are all Dr Faustus.  
One from his craze and another  
helpless from blackmail barter away his soul.

.....  
So a survey of life's Wall Street says that  
among those with the buying power these days self-respect is very popular. (5)

The above poem talks about the atrocities of the people in power. Some powerful people indulge in buying self-respect from people, i.e., they do not have any qualms about subjugating people to meet their ends. These people are unscrupulous and intimidate weak people and impose their will upon them. And weak people, like Dr. Faustus, keep selling their souls to realize their ambitions.

***Love That Blossoms***

The poem "A Message" reflects the picturesque rainy season and the thoughts of love that blossom on experiencing this wonderful season: "The moment of moon-rise is waiting for us."

It's the same weather.  
The rain's laughter rings in the trees, echoes.  
.....  
The path to the garden that knows us is looking for us.  
The moment of moon-rise is waiting for us. (5)

In "Pink Flowers," she talks about the return of an unfaithful lover. Unfortunately, the return of the lover does not herald the return of the previous pristine love:

Pink flowers blossomed in the season I met you.  
With your attentions they are opening again,  
.....  
The body was still hotfoot with its infatuations,  
the feet bruised on the way. (5)

Time has healed the vagaries of an unfaithful lover, but Shakir questions whether holding on to lost love with hurt memories can bring back the passion and enthusiasm back into the relationship.

In yet another poem "Vanity / Vanity Thy Name Is"

He is so simple.  
His world is so different from mine.  
.....  
But I wish  
—whatever he says—  
I could believe it a while. (5)

The verses reflect a woman's incredulity as she comprehends the deceptiveness of a man and yet yearns to believe in him. If she can believe in him even for a short span of time she can stay happy for a while. But she knows it is just a pipedream.

### **Beautiful Poetry Emanates from Sadness**

Beautiful poetry emanates from a lot of sadness. Shakir's poems prove that the most beautiful songs are those of pain.

### **Innovations**

Parveen Shakir's innovations and creativity can be seen in the poem "Departmental Store" quoted below. The entire poem in original and the English translation by the author of the article is given below that so as to bring out the variations in Urdu and English languages and justify the poet's skills.

Pearl Ka Natural Pink  
Revlon Ka Hand Lotion  
Elizabeth Arden Ka Bullish Oh Bhi  
Medora Main Phir Nail Polish Ka Koee Naya Shade Aaya?  
Mere Banafshi Dopatay Say Milti Hoe  
Rimmel Main Lipstick Milay Gi ?  
Haan Wo Tulips Ka Shampoo Bhi Dijiyee Ga

Yaad Aaya!!  
Kuch Roz Pehlay Jo Tuzor Liya Tha, Wo Bilkul He BeKaar Nikla  
Dosra Dijiyee Ga..

Zara Bill Bana Dain ...

Aray ! Wo Konay Main Ak Scent Rakha Huwa Hai  
Dikhaye Zara Usay Test Kar Kay Dekhon

( Khudaya , Khudya, Yeh tu us ke Pasandeda khushboo rahi hai.  
Sada us kay Malboos say phootti thi.)

Zara Is Ki Qeemat Bata Dain.  
Is Qadar !!

Acha Yoon Kijiye  
Baki Chezain Kabhi Or Lay Jaun Gi  
Aaj Tou Sirf Is Scent Ko Pack Kar Dijiyee... (6)

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English translation (translated by the author of the article)

Pearl's Natural pink,  
Revlon's Hand lotion,  
Elizabeth Arden's blush, that too,  
Do you have any new nail polish shades in Medora?  
Do you have any shades of lipstick in Rimmel  
that go with my Benarasi dupatta?  
Yes, Please pack that Tulips shampoo too.

I remember!!!  
The tweezer I took a few days back is completely useless,  
give me another one.

Please prepare the bill.

Oh! The perfume in that corner,  
Let me check it

(Oh god, Oh god, this is his favourite fragrance,  
It always emanates from him.)

Could you please tell me the price?  
Is it so valuable?

Okay, please pack this perfume alone for now,  
I will take the rest of the items some other time.

The poem is basically a one-sided dialogue of a woman in a departmental store. But we can understand the response and actually the response is really unimportant here. In the above lines, Shakir reveals the pathetic extent to which a woman is willing to go to impress her lover. All the items the woman in the poem is purchasing are related to trends in fashions and makeup which must be essential to her in her daily life. Yet, we see that she is more interested in buying a perfume which is priced exorbitantly just to please her partner.

Actually, the line which says that the perfume always emanates from him is interesting as it suggests that the man could be having other women in his life. It is possible that the fragrance rubs on him from another woman who uses this perfume. Yet, the woman is so intent on pleasing her man that she is willing to forego all other items that she likes to have so that she can purchase the highly priced perfume.

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The technique is innovative and the theme of a 'woman's undying love for a man' is used creatively in this technique. This poem alone stands as an evidence of the expertise and adeptness of Parveen Shakir's perception, observation and poetic skills.

## Ghazals

Apart from free verse, ghazal was another forte in which Shakir excelled. The themes in ghazals are also about love, women power, restrictions for women, social atrocities, etc. The poet often talked about her cynical beliefs on eternal love and restraints placed on women in the name of gender, religion and law. Her poems urge women to reach out for the world beyond the man-made barriers. Couplets of her ghazals are often quoted for their wit, wisdom and message.

One of her famous couplets from the ghazal "Wo tho khushbu hai" which is often quoted is as follows:

"Wo tho khushbu hai, hawaon main bikhar jaye ga/ Masla phool ka hai, phool kidher jayega?"

He is fragrance and would waft in the air/ the problem lies with the flower - where shall the flower go? (wikepedia)

In this couplet, Shakir associates an unfaithful man to 'fragrance' which is simply carried on by the breeze in diverse directions. Breeze, here, is the essence of the other women he is interested in. Flower is the innocent woman, who relentlessly pines away for her lover's undivided attentions. Shakir uses many such metaphors like 'titli' which means butterfly to symbolize the unfaithful lover, 'badal' (cloud) for love, 'barish' (rain) for affection and 'andhi' (storm) for difficulties.

Another famous couplet of Shakir is as follows:

"Jugnuu ko din kay wakt parakhne ki zid karain/ Bachchay hamaray ehed kay chalaak ho gaye"

They insist upon evaluating the firefly in daylight/ The children of our age, have grown clever (wikipedia).

In this couplet, Shakir expresses her amazement at the surprising knowledge the 21<sup>st</sup> generation has and her admiration for the present generation's ingenuity.

In another ghazal, 'Terii Khushbuu kaa pataa karatii hai'

masalaa jab bhii uThaa chiraaGo.n kaa  
faisalaa sirf havaa karatii hai

Whenever there is a disturbance in flame, the decision is made by the breeze. (translated by the author of the article)

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The meaning of the above couplet is the fidelity of a lover is determined by his distraction when he meets other women.

In her ghazal, 'Dil kaa kyaa hai vo to chaahegaa musal\_sal milanaa' she expresses:

“Woh bachpaney ki neend ki to ab khawb ho gayi,  
Kya umar thi ke raat huyi aur so gaye.”

Childhood sleep has just become a dream.

What an age is it that made one sleep as soon as it is night! (translated by the author of the article)

Shakir is talking about the innocence of childhood and the troubles of grownups which do not allow them to sleep peacefully.

In another ghazal, Ghar ka darwaaza khulaa rakha hai

“Ghar ka darwaaza khulaa rakha hai,  
Waqt mil jaye to zehmat karna.”

The door of the home is kept open

If it is not much of a trouble to you, please come whenever you have time to spare.  
(translated by the author of the article)

Here, she is talking about a woman who is waiting for her lover to return to her. 'Ghar ka darwaza' is a metaphor for 'way to heart' and she is implying that the wait is eternal and unconditional.

The implication of unrequited love haunts throughout Shakir's ghazals. A man's infidelity, unwillingness to commit to a single woman and fleeting feelings of love reverberate in these ghazals as seen above.

Either in the form of free verse or ghazal, Parveen Shakir's verses wonder about a woman's abject surrender just to see her love reflected in the eyes of her lover.

## Conclusion

For many women writers, writing comes from isolation and alienation, when they do not have a support group to fall back on. Writing for these women is a tool for survival. Women write under the censorship of self, society and religion. These constraints dictate the range of topics a woman is allowed to write about. Women have to fight individually and in isolation for their rights. Women writers have to combat two strong male bastions, one is bureaucratic form of suppression and the other which has far more consequences, societal and religious and in most of the cases they work hand in glove.

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Writing is a manifold process for Urdu women writers as they not only write to satisfy their creative urge but also help in the progress of their nation and address the problems of women in their countries.

It is very difficult for a woman writer in a restrained society to voice her inner feelings. However, Shakir, in spite of her personal setbacks, made a mark in Urdu literature as a romantic woman poet. Further, it should be noted that, Shakir's themes were not restricted to love poetry but we see the free will of an intellectual woman questioning on socially relevant issues like the status of labourers in her country, the place of a woman in a man's life, the lost childhood that culminates into grownup life which is full of problems.

Shakir is not a woman with a subdued voice; she let her inner feelings be known through her poetry without any restrictions. Through her poetry, Shakir's contention that women are under pressure of preconceived notions of society comes out in a remarkable manner.

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