Abstract: Women are the hardest hit social group in Pakistan since last five decades. They are being marginalized at the very least and actually victimized in a worst case scenario in the name of Sharia laws. Over the ages women, along with other ethnic and religious groups, have been subjected to treatment that has induced doubt, confusion, cynicism, and despair among such abused groups.

Kishwar Naheed is one of the foremost non-conformist feminist poets and women activists of Pakistan who actively participated in the agitations against state-dictated atrocities targeting women, and she wrote extensively about the rigid constraints on women of a political system imbued with farce religiosity and hypocrisy. While rejecting the all-male chauvinistic social order, despite the strong religious convictions of her countrymen, she struggled to redefine the status of women through her poetry. Her poetry has always been seen as a threat to the patriarchal order. Women in her poems become their own liberators and they crave and strive to break the rules and shed the shackles which imprison them; in her poems we see women trespassing the boundaries of marginality, soaring both high and to horizons heretofore forbidden them.

This paper examines and questions the validity of laws, be they Sharia laws or social practices that dishonor women, and construes that both systems of justice marginalize and imprison women in their web of authoritarianism. It demonstrates how Kishwar Naheed, in writing poetry that consistently depicted woman as existing on the margins of their society, participated in their social rebirth.

Keywords: Feminist Urdu Poetry, Kishwar Naheed, Modern Urdu Poetry, Feminist Poetry in Pakistan, Women Poets of Pakistan, Sharia Laws, Hudood.
justice is actively practiced in Balochistan, NWFP, as well as districts of Sindh bordering with Balochistan as to settle legal cases and disputes. Strongest allegation on the jirga system has been about its discrimination against women folk during the course of decisions and implementation on variety of its rules and regulations. The Participatory Development Initiatives of Pakistan observes that

…there might be many causes and reasons behind the ever-increasing trend of violence against women in our society, including lack of awareness, education etc., however, there is a common perception held by the civil society that tribal jirgas are the main and basic causes of increase in the cases of violence against women including the cases of honour killing in Sindh province...Despite abolition of Jirga system and official ban on holding jirgas are frequently held in various parts of Sindh by Sardars often under official patronage and protocol. Jirgas in Sindh are usually held in the government-owned circuit houses (PDI, 2005).

On the contrary, male chauvinists frequently assert that Islam has given more rights to women than has any other religion but even then women are being subjected to diverse forms of oppression, violence and injustice in the name of religion, although the protective attitude of the Qur’an “toward all downtrodden and oppressed classes of people, appears to be weighted in many ways in favor of women, many of its women-related teachings have been used in patriarchal Muslim societies against, rather than for, women” (Hassan, February 25, 2000). The pseudo-religiosity and all-consciously formulated ordinances do not speak only about religious oppressions; rather there is a certain mentality that is deeply ingrained in strictly patriarchal societies like Pakistan (Jamal, April 9, 2012). Hina Jilani, lawyer and Human Rights activist posits that “the right of life of women in Pakistan is conditional on their obeying social norms and traditions which are deeply rooted and have made the life of women miserable” (Amnesty International, 1999).

Talbot argues that the abrupt termination of historical narratives in 1947 has helped to obfuscate the continuities between the colonial and contemporary eras (Talbot, 1999, p.12); therefore, the inheritances of the colonial era still play an important role in its social structure. This nuclear state couldn’t develop standards of political accountability neither it could evolve a civil society that would be recognizably committed to pluralism and equity (Shaikh, 2000, p. 326), however, this nation with the culture of political intolerance could develop and foster a system to abuse women in the name of religion. The legacy of the pre-independence tradition of vice-regalism and persistence of authoritarianism in Pakistani politics (Talbot, 1999) paved way for religious orthodoxy as well because it also demands authority of one (male) on the other (female). These factors are also accountable for social unrest and despondency and they manifested themselves in two different forms of male dominance and commodification on women’s body and mind to such a measure that “sharply limit [ted] our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by non-liberal traditions” (Mahmood, 2001, p. 203). Discriminatory nature of certain laws that violate women’s rights and violence against women in the family and society continued marginalizing women. Sara Suleri observes that “…if a postcolonial nation chooses to embark on an official program of Islamization, the inevitable result in a Muslim state will be [a] legislation that curtails women's rights.” (Suleri, 2000, p.1324).

Over the ages, women along with other ethnic and religious groups were subjected to doubts, confusions, cynicism and despair. Women were the hardest hit social group since the dreadful military dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haque (1977–1988) as they were marginalized and victimized in the name of Shari’a laws. But, interestingly, it was the period that heralded the beginning of a nationwide awakening among women along with the sprouting of different women bodies to voice their concerns against the atrocities on them. The dictatorial rule and the campaign of the fundamentalist extremist politico-religious bodies to segregate women from education and politics, and promulgation of laws on a patriarchal-authoritarian base to oppress women gave rise to a vibrant movement for women’s rights. There was a “significant organizational stride” (Rouse, 1992, p. 103) that culminated in a nationwide stir to challenge authoritarianisms in all its manifestations, to demand equality and justice. It paved way for some substantial amendments in the notorious and intrinsically misogynistic Offense of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance, 1979 (Ordinance VII of 1979). This ordinance required a victim of rape to produce four credible, truthful and pious male witnesses about whom the Court is satisfied, having regard to the requirements of tazkiyah al-shuhood [credibility of witnesses] to confess that they have seen the act of penetration, failing which the victim was trialed and punished for committing adultery or fornication.

Women were also victimized under the Offence of Qazf Ordinance 1979 (that applies to a complainant who makes an accusation of zina [fornication/adultery/ extramarital sex] against another person in a Court, but fails to produce four witnesses in support thereof before the Court, and when the complainant is found to have made a false accusation of zina-hil-jabr [rape]). It was openly alleged and widely believed that the Pakistani police proved to be disappointingly criminal in practice, by refusing to register cases under Zina
bilateral i.e. rape, and recording it instead as a case of Zina i.e. adultery (Aslam, 2003; Amnesty International, 1999; Jahangir; Quraishi 1997). Promulgated in the name of Islam, the Zina Ordinance remained a tool of oppression for almost twenty-five years. President Musharraf’s gift to the women of Pakistan in the form of the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006 did not repeal Hudood Ordinance rather it was “hollowed out to its barest essentials”, remarks Martin Lau concluding his analysis of this Act, “it cannot be dismissed as a mere window dressing to satisfy a Western audience” (Lau, 2007, p. 1314).

Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and well-known human rights and women’s rights activist, remarked that sentences of stoning and amputation are still possible under the Act and that Pakistan had “a long way to go” with regards to women’s rights (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2007). These amendments “are not a substitute for the repeal of the Hudood Ordinances,” emphasizes Supreme Court lawyer and General Secretary of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Iqbal Haider, however, this is a positive step, although much needs to be done” (Sarwar, 2006). The whole system of law making and law enforcement appears like the cop of Andrienne Rich’s poem ‘Rape’.

One women’s rights group in Pakistan says the number of incidents of violence against women in Pakistan has increased at least seven percent over the past year, and the impact of violent gender discrimination is being deeply felt in a number of ways (Behn, 2012). Shahnaz Khan’s (2011) The Butterfly’s Cage is a shocking example of the society that marginalized its women to such an extent that lives of millions of women in Pakistan got circumscribed by traditions which enforce extreme seclusion and submission to men, many of whom impose their virtually proprietorial control over women with violence (Amnesty International, 1998). It is worth mentioning that 2,713 cases of violence against women were reported only in Southern Punjab from January 2012 to October 2012. While out of 4,585 'reported' cases of violence against women in Pakistan during the first half of this year, about 1,027 incidents happened in Sindh (Dawn, October 23, 2012). The first bi-annual report (January-June, 2012) of Aurat Foundation reveals that despite extensive efforts to control honour-killing incidents, 436 such cases were reported besides 435 rape and gang rape cases (Imran, October 23, 2012). Article 1, 1993 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women describes the term violence against women as “…any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN General Assembly, 20 December 1993).

1. “These include cases of aas-aaf custom (10) – in which women accused of ‘bringing shame to the family’ take an oath of innocence on the Holy Quran and then walk on burning coals spread over six metres-, abduction and torture after abduction (577), acid attacks (20), burning by throwing kerosene oil and petrol (17), kaala kaali [kara kari/ summary killing] (25), assault after divorce (45), assault by in-laws (100), ‘honour’ killings (112), murder and assault for contracting a marriage with their free will (114), murder (162), victims of panchayat decisions where women were either sold or killed (37), rape (304), assault by police (20), suicide in reaction to family pressure, rape or other forms of violence (444), torture leading to physical or mental disability (489), wani [child marriage] (37), watta satta [exchanging brides between two families] (25) and cases of gender discrimination and disinheritance (175) (Jafri, November 3, 2012).

In its annual report, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said at least 943 women were killed in 2011 for damaging their family name. The number marks an increase of more than 100 from 2010 (Crilly, 20 Dec 2011). Pakistan has become third most dangerous country for women in the world wherein more than 1,000 women and girls are murdered in honour-killing every year, and besides that, 90 percent of Pakistani women suffer from domestic violence and abuse at the hands of the male perpetrators, family members, society and state agents (Jamal April 9, 2012). These violence include sexual assault at work places, educational institutions, hospitals; rape, spousal murder, beating, acid throwing, custodial torture, honor-killings, etc. Even educated women of elite and upper middle classes appear not to have dispensed with internalized customs and traditions which directly deprive them of dignity and often of life itself. Farida Shaheed, sociolinguist and woman activist, believes that in addition to the traditional patriarchal [feudal/tribal] structures and systems, women are facing “a new surge of conservative thinking that permeates ever-larger swathes of society, cutting across class and other divides” (UNRISD, March 6, 2012). It is rightly asserted that the word ‘woman’ in Pakistan is synonymous with ‘endurance’ because the whole society has mantled the robe of a guardian and it acts as an oppressor, browbeating women into obedience. A woman in Pakistan “is simply forced to accept certain bare facts of life once she grows up to be a woman. Be it on streets, or for that matter in restaurants, a woman is first and foremost required to be alert” (Bhatti). Right from severe repercussions of the Hudood Ordinance to the socially structured gender apartheid, there is a never-ending phenomenon of marginalizing women in the name of “cultural relativism, tolerance, anti-racism, diversity, or political
correctness” (Chesler, 2010). On the basis of the investigations of the pervasive problem of violence against women in Pakistan’s two largest cities, Karachi and Lahore, Human Rights Watch (1999) observed that despite the severity of the problem, the government’s response has been indifferent at best; it has served to exacerbate the suffering of women victims of violence and to obstruct the course of justice.

True, violence against women is a global issue and every society is permeated by the continued occurrences and reactions to instances of rape and sexual assault on women. But while a gang rape on a bus in India sparks a global furor and a rape in Steubenville, Ohio sparks a similar wave of repudiation (Michelman and Tracy, January 22, 2013), the plight of such victims in Pakistan is, by and large, “confined to formulate articles in the press, slow-moving cases in the courts, and frequent dropped charges due to bribes, threats of further violence and family pressure on the victim to avoid further shame” (Haque, December 31, 2012). However, …the blaming, shaming, and judgment directed toward the victims of these horrific crimes remains a key component of the dialogue surrounding even these high-profile instances of sexual assault. While the sheer volume of sexual assault and rape speaks to the prevalence of violent and negative attitudes towards women, the victim-blaming and judgment that occurs paints an even more disturbing picture revealing how subversive and long-lasting these negative perspectives of women are. (Michelman and Tracy, January 22, 2013).

When states, societies and families fail to safeguard the rights of a person or group, literature stands sentinel to protect those rights by raising voice against injustices and atrocities. Therefore, it does not astonish that besides the women movements against this authoritarian, feudalistic and inhuman culture, Pakistan witnessed a surge of interest in feminist discourse that challenged the society on behalf of the female victims who were either killed or marginalized, and the ones who face the threat of seclusion irrespective of their class and social status. It generated conflicts “with tradition and to some extent, religion, as interpreted by men and expressed in Fundamentalist Islam” (Ahmad, 1990, p.7).

Kishwar Naheed is one of the foremost non-conformist feminist poet, and the woman activist of Pakistan who actively participated in the agitations against state-run atrocities on women. She extensively wrote about the rigid constraints of the political system that is blended with farce religiosity and hypocrisy. While rejecting the all-male chauvinistic social order, despite strong religious convictions of her country, she struggled to redefine the status of women through her poetry. She is aware that men are free and uninhibited to force restrictions, abuses and sexual violence onto women as they receive full protection from the law, police, and courts. The society has made women believe that they would have done something to deserve the crime that has been committed on them.

Naheed’s poetry has always been seen as a threat to the patriarchal order as the women in her poems become their own liberators and they crave and strive to break the rules and shackles imposed upon them by men, to break the boundaries of marginality, they want to cross over, to soar high in the horizons where they have always been forbidden to roam. She has been described as the only Pakistani feminist “who poses a serious threat to men through her work, her lifestyle, her manner and through ceaseless verbal challenge” (Ahmad, pp. 20-21). The dominant thought that exists in her poetry is a strong desire to break away from the social construct which she was brought up with to challenge the authoritarian attitude of state and society to control woman’s body and sexuality. She 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 (Anantharam, 2009, p.209). These were the aspects about which a woman was not supposed to express her opinions. She is among those handful of Pakistani women who, amidst the political turmoil and social discrimination, revolted against the religious orthodoxy, country’s laws and the societal norms that kept on victimizing and marginalizing women.

Naheed’s corpus of work is a glaring example of a marginalized voice dealing with a sexist and gender-based social milieu. Fahmida Riaz, herself a great feminist poet, and contemporary of Naheed, admits that Naheed, as an outspoken representative of women in literature “explored [the] themes related to women that were not touched by poets, such as physical violence meted out to women, oppression under the guise of protecting women and female circumcision”(Riaz, 2012).

Born in 1940 in Balandshahar, Uttar Pradesh, into a conservative family in which the lore and tradition of her culture were alive and vibrant, Kishwar is witness to various forms of violence against women in the wake of partition and during the turbulent years in Pakistan following partition where her family migrated in the year after Jinnah’s death. She was denied formal school education and was forced to accept the orthodox way of life. She experienced a childhood which “raised more questions in her young but sensitive mind than the combined capacity of those around her to answer. Every time she was asked to shut up, the revolt inside her gathered a bit more momentum” (Ishtiaq, p. 300).
In not living up to the social stereotype of an ideal Muslim woman, she felt herself secluded from her surroundings. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Qaid-e Azam, is reported to say that …No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you; we are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live (Walid, 1997, p. 23).

‘Censorship’, one of the earliest poems of Naheed, clearly indicates that even after years of Jinnah’s demise, there was a deep-rooted insecurity and anxiety among the women of Pakistan.

We, from the time immemorial, standing on the rooftops of the stories believe that this city is ours. The earth beneath the walls of foundation has sunk but we, even now, standing on the rooftops of the stories, assume life to be those wide fissures in the shattered bricks of the insipid afternoon’s wasted alleyways.

The ironies and ambiguities coherent in these lines clearly indicate that Naheed was not prepared to accept the gender role allocated to women by the society. She derided the role of male-dominancy and the image of women created by male authors. The intensely chauvinistic society derided her attitude towards men. Refusing to succumb to the irrational restrictions and bondages, she didn’t see much difference between religious fanatics and communist fanatics, and declared that both were extremists. She is aware that male dominance and commodification are subjecting women to violence of the earth beneath the walls of foundation has sunk but we, even now, standing on the rooftops of the stories, assume life to be those wide fissures in the shattered bricks of the insipid afternoon’s wasted alleyways.

The poem, tinged with irony, challenges the perception of women as religious and domestic structures of Pakistan, …it was only natural that she was treated in the household with the contempt that a rebellious soul deserves—at least in the mind of the elders. As she forced her way into the world at large, she found it no less regimented. Her marriage, her forays into the literary world, her exposure to the work environment, her interactions with friends and so-called friends, her travels across the land …nothing changed her view that the woman was a soul condemned. (Ishtiaq, p. 300)

1. All translations are by Farhat Mansoob (2013) except where mentioned

One of her celebrated and oft-quoted poems *Ham Gunah-gaar Auratan* (We Sinful Women) grapples with this issue. The poem begins with the announcement that men can no more enforce their interpretations of social structure *volens nolens*, even if these women who do not conform to their interpretation of family or social structure are called ‘impure’. The poem demonstrates a distinct departure from the practice of submission to the patriarchal control in the name of religious order.

It is we sinful women who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns who don’t sell our lives who don’t bow our heads who don’t fold our hands together

The poem, tinged with irony, challenges the authority of male prejudice and rejects the restrictions falsely imposed on women. It is we sinful women while those who sell the harvest of our bodies become exalted become distinguished become the just princes of the material world.

There is something reassuring about this denunciation of eloquence when she says that

It is we sinful women who come out raising the banner of truth up against barricades of lies on the highways who find stores of persecution piled on each threshold
who find the tongues which could speak have been severed. (Ahmad [tr], p. 31)

If poetry is imagined 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), then Naheed is also among those women who “used this genre to give voice to issues of self and sexuality and to write themselves into the nation” (Anantharam, 2009, p.222). The dominant thought that exists within the Pakistani social system based on religion and taboos is to make a woman ‘perfect’ even if men keep themselves indulged in all sorts of imperfections. For them, all struggles for women’s human rights whether they emerge from within the boundaries of religion or from a secular and global perspective are equally seen as betrayal. “Betrayal of one’s religion: the monolithic Islam. Betrayal of one’s culture: the imaginary transnational Muslim culture. And betrayal of one’s community: the Umma. Women’s struggles for human rights are seen as dangerously divisive of the ‘Muslim world’” (Helie-Lucas, 2004, p.31). The poem ‘Anticlockwise’ is the first poem by a Pakistani woman that shows this “betrayal” unveiling the ugliest side of dominancy and marginality:

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. (Ahmad [tr], p.59)

Nazish Brohi and Afiya Shehrbano (2008) argue that if women’s bodies are a governance tool, then claiming authority over their own bodies, women often challenge a wider spectrum of collective male decision-making. This, essentially, is the male prerogative and ‘honour’ that is violated. The killings prompted by ‘loss of honour’ are not only about the loss of women’s chastity per se, but also the loss of control and authority, far wider than control over a female body.

This poem presents repeated and ceaseless authoritarian attempts to control the senses of a woman, her attempts of annihilation, sequences of her unwilling prostration and surrender to the will of a man that keep her trapped in her body and sexuality. This is seen by Anita Anantharam (2009, p.210) as a challenge to “the capacity of society, God, and Islam to restrict her movement”. Albeit, Naheed, besides challenging “the capacity of society”, is trying to bring about a much needed paradigm shift in the interpretation of Islamic law to expose the inequalities embedded in it “not as a manifestation of the divine will but as a construction made by male jurists”(Mir-Hosseini, 2004, p. 22). She is more interested in dangerous political and social construct of Muslimness rather than Islam itself. The closing stanza of the poem is a caustic and satirical attack on the system.

Your fear
of my being free, being alive
and able to think
might lead you, who knows, into what travails.
(Ahmad [tr], p.60)

Another poem, KHud-Kalaamii (Talking to Myself) also presents a reactionary argument that goes well with Helene Cixous’ invocation that:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into the history – by her own movement...Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. (Cixous, 1996, p. 320)

Naheed, without showing any hint of surrendering herself to the ‘earthly gods’, continues breaking the shackles around women’s lives, thoughts and bodies. Neelaam Ghar (Auction House), published years before the promulgation of the Hudood Ordinance, challenges the male authority on female’s body and mind with a chillingly bitter tone of hatred:

The taste of death
drips from his lips
in the forms of words.
He, turning his hates into kisses, 
planting blue scars on my face, 
wants to demonstrate that 
he has the right to use my body in whatever way he 
wants…

While hitting my face 
the imprints of your fingers 
like a stuffed bread 
leave hundred-colored balloons on my cheeks. 
You are the people with rights 
You have won the rights in exchange of mehr…

The poem ‘Persona II’ written right after the 
implementation of the Hudood Ordinance describes 
the tension of relationship between the oppressor 
and the oppressed:

The meeting point of two slant lines 
a meaningless act of 
proving the logic of obscure relations. 
He, becoming the protector, 
continued drawing lines around the meeting point 
and within my being the line of negation and 
rejection 
continued deepening. 
What is the relation between a cave and a grave!

The closing verse of this poem is a complete 
rejection of male authoritarianism:

Wove my intestines into a rope 
and enjoy swinging 
as I have shut 
the cauldron of my tongue.

She is aware that how unbearable and painful 
would be the feelings of the male chauvinists who 
have woven a web of controlling women’s desires, 
psyche and sexuality in the name of religion and 
culture. Undeterred by the authoritarian attitude she 
challenges the whole religio-political social system:

Punish me 
for I wrote the significance of the dream in 
my own blood 
for I compiled a book ridden with obsessions 
Punish me 
for I freed womanhood from the insanity of 
deluded nights 
Punish me 
for you might lose face if I further live 
Punish me 
for I am the seeker of a new life in every breath

As, for women, who are frequently made 
the repositories of culture, the issue of identity is 
crucial (Shaheed, 2004, p. 8), Mai kaun HuuN 
(Who Am I) is one such poem where Naheed, 
imbued with feminist triumph, exemplifies the 
stereotyping of women in a typical patriarchal 
society with the help of chilling imageries and 
morbidity to let the world know that her identity is 
no more to be decided by men.

I am not that woman selling you socks and shoes
I am the one you buried in the walls 
to make yourself fearless as the breeze 
unaware and unmindful 
that stones can never smother a voice

I am the one you kept hidden 
within the weight of custom and tradition 
unaware and unmindful 
that light can never be afraid of darkness

I am the one whom, in the name of modesty and 
chastity, 
you bought and sold…

I am the one you married off 
to get rid of me 
unaware and unmindful 
that a nation of enslaved minds can never flourish.

for a long time you traded in my chastity 
my motherhood and my loyalty.

now it is the season for flowers to bloom on the 
laps, in the minds. 
half-naked on the poster 
no, I am not that woman selling you socks and 
shoes..

While the feminist reading of Sharia laws has its 
own implications, the political reality acts as a 
detriment for the women who are committed to 
seeking reforms through religious reinterpretation, 
argues Afifa Faisal (2012), whether such 
developments challenge the transformative 
potential of Islamic feminism is subject to debate. 
Naheed summarily rejects male hegemony that 
sprouted in the guise of Hudood Ordinance, social 
tabos, various forms of domestic and social 
violence, sexual abuse to victimize women.

It is noteworthy that, not only today’s 
consumerist society, even classical Urdu poetry as 
a whole, represents women fragmented into the 
elements of their anatomy. Naheed emerges as a 
poet who strongly and vehemently objects to this 
trend. Sara Mills argues that this representation is 
…far more frequently than do such representations 
of men – this is true not only of pornographic 
material, but advertising images, romances and 
love poetry, amongst other genres…the [images 
of] female identified by anatomical elements such 
as cheeks, forehead, eyes and lips…are so familiar 
that it is difficult to imagine them otherwise, and 
so conventional that it is difficult to see their 
consequences as representations of the world. 

The poem entitled Ay Meri Qaum! Meri Binti 
Sun! (O My Nation! Listen to my Entreaty!) is a 
direct attack on the unsolicited interference of 
religion and the religious bodies working as
They hate woman, as if they hate their own mother and their own daughter. In every shape of woman they see lust and decorate their dreams as such. May any disaster fall upon the world, they will not speak. May all the officers of all the country become corrupt, drunk, venal, they will not speak. On each and every step throats are slit, people are bought and sold, they will not speak. Yes, but if any woman emerges with a banner in hand – instantly they will speak instantly delete her from the sphere of Islam, from every reward of life.

O my nation! Seek shelter from these merchants of Islam else in the harems of tribal leaders and landlords our futures will be nurtured. These people will not issue fatwas against them (Shoaib [tr], 2009, pp. 84-85).

Likewise, the poem “Talibaan se Qibla-ruu Guftagoo” (In a Solemn Conversation with the Talibaan) directly hits the religious discourse announcing women’s participation in Islamic revitalization. Besides dealing with the restrictions being imposed upon women in the name of religion and culture, it paves ways for a feminist social critique operating within the threshold of Pakistani culture.

They who are frightened even of girls they who are averse even to knowledge and wisdom, they speak of the great God, He, who commands knowledge.... Unrelated to His command, they declare:

that no hand should carry a book Nor fingers should hold a pen... Those frightened even of girls announce everywhere: that the budding contours of a girl be veiled. That there is no need that these girls soar like birds... these girls do not need to go to any schools, any offices...

Keep courage, believe this
That they who are frightened even by girls they are such pygmies.

The poems like ChiyuNitaaN Haathi Khaa Jaati HuiN (Ants Consume the Elephant) present universal issues of violation of human rights. This demonstration of paradigm shift clearly illustrates the second phase of Naheed’s poetic development wherein situating herself in the tradition, she strives to detach herself from its cultural milieu.

On whom should I compose a poem now That widow who without justice under the shadow of spears and guns besides the grave is seeing her beloved’s face On whom should I write a poem now The city of Kosovo where a mother has found all her six beloved children in the same grave Or should I go see in Albania in unknown faces the same crying, lamenting motherhood On whom should I write a poem now My seven year old girl is sitting in the imperial scales of the masters: Wear a chaddar Laughing, talking, dancing, singing all are lewd...(Shoaib, 2009, pp. 95-96)

Whereas the earlier poems (from her collection Lab-e Goyaa to Be-Naam Musaaafat [Unnamed Journey,1971], GaliyaaN Dhuap Darwaaze [Alleways, the Sun, Doorways, 1978], MalaamatoN ke Darmayaan [Amidst Reproaches, 1981], Siyah Haashiye meN Gulaabii raNg [The Pink within a Black Border, 1986], and Khayaalii ShaKhs se Muqaabela [Confrontations with an Imagined Person, 2009]) that embody images like ‘faces smoothly caked with powder like a fresh grave’ and frequent use of the imagery of a grave or graveyard for a woman’s body and for the country itself are stylistically rich with metaphors, anaphors and metonymies, and represent host of issues related with emancipation of women, pain and trauma of domestic and social violence, sexual abuses and female sexuality, the later poems in the poetry collections like Main Pehley Janam mei Raat thi (I Was Night In My Previous Life, 1998), SoKhta-Saaamaani-e Dil (Compositions of a Scorchred Heart, 2002), Wahshat Aur Baaruud meN LipTii huii Shaa’eri (The Poems Wrapped in Fright and Gunpowder, 2009) bear a vast range of topics.

They are a direct conversation with the collapsing social structure and with them who are self-appointed guardians of the society. These collections show that the marginalized woman is detaching herself from domestic, social and religious restraints.

Naheed becomes increasingly prescient as she gets courage to vehemently criticize every obstacle that fetters the emergence and growth of a purely humanistic point of view. Showalter talks about the three phases that women writers passed:
1. The feminine phase – when women began to write and imitate male masters, concealing their true identity (for example, George Eliot).

2. The feminist phase - that coincides with the development of the suffragette movement. It is characterized by the outburst of women's anger and the desire to prove that women are equal to men.

3. The female (ideal) phase – that started when women began to write about their own experiences and disregarded the world of men. (Milena Kostić, 2006, pp. 72-73)

It can be justifiably said that a victim of oppression and cruelty, Kishwar Naheed started her poetic journey as a suffragette, as a young girl who was being forced to accept what she loathed. It was the beginning of being aware of the split within herself with the awareness of socio-political and pseudo-religious restraints, state-run atrocities and forced marriage that later turned from a “filial exile-in-space into something more bitter – separation under the same roof” (Milena Kostić, 2006, p. 78). Her creative process presents a diachronic evaluation of her sensibility too, and it reflects the changes in her thought process from paradoxical space of marginality to defying socio-cultural, political and literary traditions. Besides the failure of the Pakistani state to provide justice, its surrender to the militant Islam, rise of Taliban and neo-imperialism in Pakistan, and the US invasion of Afghanistan, “what rings clear in all of Naheed’s poetry is the call to equality and undeniable rights for everyone – especially women, as they become the subject of her poetry repeatedly” (Shoaib, 2009, p.82).

Kishwar Naheed’s creativity, spanning more than four decades started from the voice of a secluded and marginalized woman’s reactions to the world around her. Fraught with feminist ideas, doubts and depressions, being haunted by the voices of resistance and rebellion her poetic career, slowly and effectively, culminated into the quest for humanity forsaking the distinctions between men and women.

Reference:


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The Impure Woman (Marginality and Detachment in the Poetry of Kishwar Naheed)

