

Classic Poetry Series

Ishrat Afreen
- poems -

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Ishrat Afreen(25 December 1956)

Ishrat Afreen (Urdu: ایشراٹ آفرین; Hindi: इशरात अफरीन; alternative spelling: Ishrat Aafreen; born December 25, 1956) is an Urdu poet and women's rights activist named one of the five most influential and trend-setting female voices in Urdu Literature. Her works have been translated in many languages including English, Japanese, Sanskrit and Hindi. The renowned ghazal singers Jagjit Singh & Chitra Singh also performed her poetry in their anthology, Beyond Time (1987). Famed actor Zia Mohyeddin also recites her nazms in his 17th and 20th volumes as well as his ongoing concerts.

 Early Life and Career

Ishrat Jehan was born into an educated family in Karachi, Pakistan as the oldest of five children. She later took the pen name Ishrat Afreen.

She was first published at the age of 14 in the Daily Jang on April 31, 1971. She continued writing and was published in a multitude of literary magazines across the subcontinent of India and Pakistan. She eventually became assistant editor for the monthly magazine Awaaz, edited by the poet Fahmida Riaz. Parallel to her writing career she participated in several radio shows on Radio Pakistan from 1970-1984 that aired nationally and globally. She later worked under Mirza Jamil on the now universal Noori Nastaliq Urdu script for InPage.

She married Syed Perwaiz Jafri, an Indian lawyer, in 1985 and migrated to India. Five years thereafter, the couple and their two children migrated to America. They now reside in Houston, Texas with their three children.

Ishrat Afreen is currently the Principal Urdu Lecturer for The University of Texas at Austin's Hindu Urdu Flagship Program.

 Education

Afreen pursued her undergraduate education at the Allama Iqbal Govt College Karachi and later received her Masters Degree in Urdu Literature from the University of Karachi, Pakistan. She also taught at the Aga Khan School and boardinghouse.

 Literary Style

Ishrat Afreen is part of the feminist movement in Urdu Literature. Other women

in the movement include Ada Jafri, Zohra Nigah, Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed and Parveen Shakir.

She assumed the penname "Ishrat Afreen", Ishrat being her given name and Afreen meaning a positive reaction to achievement.

Ishrat Afreen identifies strongly with the poetic Urdu legends Muhammad Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. She uses their polished, traditional style and skillfully redirects it to create defiant progressive messages of individuality and rebellion against patriarchal and oppressive social norms.

** Publications **

Afreen has published two collections of poetry entitled Kunj Peeleh Poolon Ka (1985) and Dhoop Apne Hisse Ki (2005). Amongst others, she has been included in the prestigious anthology We Sinful Women and inspired the well-known anthology Beyond Belief: Contemporary Feminist Urdu Poetry. Ishrat Afreen ki Shairi was a book written solely on Afreen's poetry by respected senior novelist and literary critic Mr. Ikram Barelvi.

From Beyond Belief:

In a society which is heavily male-dominated and devoted to the past, it is not surprising then, that the most popular women poets would be those who conform to both socio-cultural and literary traditions. Yet, the women poets who attracted my interest and whose work I have found the most exciting, represent the brave departures from that literary tradition. I have tried to bring together in this selection the contemporary strain in Urdu poetry by Women; to put across a strength of feminist feeling and conviction that I myself never knew existed until I came across Ishrat Afreen's debut collection: A Grove of Yellow Flowers which prompted a search for more of the same.

Her poetry is also prescribed in courses at several Universities ranging from the University of Lahore in Pakistan to the University of Texas at Austin.

** Awards & Honors **

Afreen was honored with many prestigious awards including the Sajjad Zaheer Award in 1986. Afreen received this honor on the 50th anniversary celebration of the Progressive Writers' Association of India in New Delhi.

Afreen also received the Ahmed Adaya Award from Urdu Markaz International in

Los Angeles, California on December 9, 2006 after her book, Dhoop Apne Hisse Ki was selected by the International Urdu Jury as Best Urdu Poetry Publication of 2004-2005.

Afreen has been invited to attend many International Conferences and Festivals. She was selected to represent Pakistan in the Kavita Asia Asian Poetry Festival of 1988 in Bhopal, India which celebrated the greatest literary minds from across the Asian continent.

In September 1999, she partook in the International Poetry Festival in Stavanger, Norway.

She continues to lecture, hold workshops, attend conferences and read her poetry at Mushairas across America, Europe and Asia.

A Personal Poem

Have you ever given it a thought,
as you tread miles of footpaths,
how tender you are,
that the cruel sun of this city
can scorch you? Pushed and pummeled at the bus stop
or in futile chases,
do you ever think of the lively crowd
you just left
and its several adoring eyes?
Does it make you wonder that though you own
a million words,
you can't feed your hunger with them?
Your shelves are lined with borrowed books; this debt
can't please you much. Just think,
how you must often long for the smallest thing!
Isn't she better off compared to you,
that unlettered girl of your neighbor?
Her nails, a different shade each day;
her trousseau trunk filled with attars.
See, she laughs in her soiled dress!

Ishrat Afreen

Cold War

Yellow flowers-loving girl,
how long will you fear the girl inside you;
tell me, how long will you fight yourself?

Ishrat Afreen

Dedication

I grew
Taller than my father
And my mother won.

Ishrat Afreen

Ghazal

Hands, picking cotton - how I love those hands
A perfect metaphor for the love of the land.

They had battled with stormy seas, all night long,
When, defeated, those strange folk, reached the land.

Like a fragrant bonfire the garden glowed for me
Like stationary sparks the flowers glowed for me

Those eyes wrung dry, that can't have been me
Dearer than your life, that can't have been me

That very night such torrents of rain had to pour
When my crumbling home was assaulted as never before.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Ghazal (2)

This city does not desire a revolution any more
The mirror we found, but we haven't the stone any more

At such a time have my comrades found their crosses!
Those who remain have no heads on their shoulders any more

In search of the deep seas we came to the shores
We turned, and found, like the sands, the sea did not exist any more

Why is this crowd still armed with stones?
Aazar does not live in this city any more.

Weeping, the changing season, hides her faces in bed
For on its body Light, does not wear a raiment any more.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Ghazal (3)

Hidden inside me lives this - delicate girl
Strange aspects, strange passions she has, this girl.

I can tell you why my hands bleed so
Bare hands chiselled her from stone, this girl.

Again in the pagan temple of thought she stands
With her wounded hands - she must be Aazar's girl.

She died of grief, when they stole her dignity
So tender was the girl who lived inside this girl.

Why should you blame me for this art-
I am not the artist, not am I Aazar's girl.

Though she scatters into myriad crystals
She curls into the apparition of a flower, this girl.

The owners of the haveli really wanted
To keep within the family their own girl.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Ghazal (4)

All their lives long their marriages were blest with prayer
But they crushed their own glass bangles, to drink
I hear Enough poison there is of traditions to last us a life time
From sorrows they gave us knotted inside our veils.

Never was there a harvest in my village,
When the rose, not the kussum should have dyed our veils
To the fragrances of their apparel the wind owed a debt
Those sad princesses of all seasons who have now left.

Even kissing those fingers is reckoned a sin
Which inscribe on dust the verses of creation.

Who stole the levies on the harvest this year to keep?
Tell me who owns these fields, and who has them to keep?

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Ghazal (5)

The bitter taste of hunger on cold lips
Blood-spitting, cracked, dry, yellow lips.

Broken bangle, icy girl, rebellious age
Green body, stony eyes, and blue lips.

Bare courtyard, lone woman, long years
Blank eyes, damp veil, moist lips.

Blue poison from bitter words grazes
Peels off these peeling lips.

Begging for poison, refusing honey dew
Rebellious, stubborn, wild willful lips.

Derelict thoughts, bitter words
Lovely, gentle, red, juicy lips.

What will they say to all this talk:
'Girls, they say, must seal their lips.'

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Ghazal (6)

Why do girls follow the destinies of their mothers?
Why are their bodies deserts, their eyes the ocean deep?

Why do women keep their jewels locked in trunks
To whom they will bequeath their legacy of grief?

Those who were themselves worthy of worship
Why do they clutch stones between jasmine fingertips?

Those who remained hungry and bare-footed
Why do they never let their chadors slip?

When tragedy strikes behind closed doors
Why is it only the walls that often know.

Shining upon our union ask the rays of the morning sun
Why are the nights armed with daggers when they come?

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Ghazal (7)

Come the rains this year, in every flower bed fireflies shall be planned
The tears of the widows of peasants shall be planted.

How long will the havelis of the landlords bleed the peasants?
How long will rosy cheeks in their foundations be planted?

Heaven knows those 'voodoo' has struck my green fields?
Charms will be dug in and magic shall be planned.

So long as those who suck the fertile soil dry still live
My youths shall let the drips of their own blood be planted.

Hands which make flowers bloom from mind to mind and dream to dream
Rainbow colours, the moon, the fragrance of the notes of music shall be planted.

Ishrat Afreen

House Of God

The books said:
God lives in
tearful eyes
sunken graves
broken hearts-
God loves them all
The books
the sacred pages
the ancient tomes
should have also said:
God also lives in dreamless eyes;
He sleeps on a wooden cross;
He smiles in the seedlings of wheat

Naked bodies
protruding ribs
loaded trucks that reek of hunger
crowds of people
indigence-
some book should have pointed out:
these too are God's abodes.

[Translated by Professor C M Naim]

Ishrat Afreen

Introduction

Who am I

Don't scratch old wounds

Who am I

Not what you think I am.

I have grown up playing in the dust of my alleyways.

I learnt to fight for myself at an age when others dream dreams. I am that
winsome bud which blooms on my forefather's graves

And must smilingly endure every punishment merely because it exists

I have no name

Call me by the name

Of the Great Ghalib who came before me

By the name of Mir.

Mir, who was hailed as the god of Poetics and verse

But who died in poverty.

The Great Ghalib

Who had to beg for his wine.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Liberation

Captives

Arise

rise and chip the mountains

mountains of deed traditions

mountains of blind beliefs

mountains of cruel hatreds

In the prisons of our bodies

countless restless bodies

and- grieving souls sob

they wander round from stairway to stairway

asking when we shall free them?

Our existence is for the future generations

we owe them,

those who will come into being, through us

come into existence

The severed head which gives birth to thousands of beads

is no longer just a story.

The thing which is throbbing in the blood,

which is whining,

thousands of eyes from the veins of the body, peering restless eyes

are saying this:

Captives

These, who sleep in a house,

of yellow stone

wrapped

in sheets of insensitivity

tell them

to rise

and chip the mountains

We have to think of liberation.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Me

She belongs to the tribe of Ego
This ruthless girl
And lives way beyond
The bounds of your territory.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Migration

That silken girl from the tribe of Stones
Had imprisoned herself in the towers of tradition
In a charmed palace of self-deception she sat,
Listening to the flowers sing an epic of loneliness.
The birds kept her a gazelle emotion ran into the valley of her soul
Pranced and disappeared into the ravines
This princess of the tribe of Stones, too
Broke every shackle of trust
Seeking that gazelle emotion came
And sadly rested on the banks of the lake of sorrows
Pulling out thorns from the soles of her ego
Her lotus palms blistered, turned into roses.
Creased
Creased was the robe of her thoughts
Bloody, the body of her desires.
She'd left home in the pink of her youth
that silken girl from the tribe of Stones
And had arrived into the tribe of love.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

Poison

Her arms grew weak and numb pulling the rope
over the slimy parapet of the well,
but the water never sufficed for the man's feet

Her fingers bloodied weaving came into baskets
but her share of bread was never enough
to fill her belly's basket

She plastered cracked roofs till her shoulders broke
but no roof gave her a moment's shelter

Her fingers swelled, sewing for the entire house
but no one gave her even a thread
from last year's cotton

And now that the new crop's safe in the bales
she squats in the sun and wonders
if the poison in her aching joints
will one day reach above her head?

[Translated by Professor C M Naim]

Ishrat Afreen

Rose & Cotton

Gold bodies,
the girls toiling in the fields,
turned grey in the summer heat

At night sheathed in dew and frost,
at noon in the burning sun

These girls are different,
more beautiful
than the girls on the marble bench
whose heads are decked with jasmine buds,
who chew on roses
and go crazy when they see hot colors

The girls harvesting the sun in the field
stand at the threshold of a new life
- just like those other girls -
but their eyes have never sought out mirrors;
these girls don't know the warmth of roses
or a perfume's burning touch

Their clothes only reek of mustard greens,
their eyes have the gleam of cotton bolls.

[Translated by Professor C M Naim]

Ishrat Afreen

The Dance

The silence
now nags,
and loneliness
Chirrup on the rooftop
Sitting weary on the broken back stairs
Of my ancestral house,
I count down the centuries.
The red and white stone house
Now melts,
Dripping on me.
All lamps on desire-niches are extinguished.
Only a few leafs lie open in the book of the past,
That I guard for the ambassador of the night;
They rot in the wetness of the passage of time:
Not a single word will survive.
All ideals burn,
And a strange scene emerges
In the light of the flames.
A cold open-sided room,
And verandahs beyond.
A vast desolate courtyard,
Long entrance halls,
And a huge enclosure.
All around me,
Eerie dancing shadows dart in every direction.
They are all the slaves and bonded servants of my ancestors:
Like a million spirits crying in unison.
What is this peel of ankle bells
Raining in the verandahs?
Who plays the harp
And cries bloody tears from shapely fingers?
The sound of the harp stings my soul.
Behind all this,
Whose spirit waits in agony in private chambers?
She is the same woman,
For a kiss of whose eyes
Stars would cry themselves to sleep.
Behind the veil of the night,
Whom is she calling to her bedchamber?

To whom is she showing her tears?
In the well of this huge enclosure,
What are those cries of maidens,
That have been imprisoned for three generations?
They flutter for freedom.
Who coughs in the entrance hall?
Who is this hungry, weak child,
That has cried himself to sleep
In front of the grain-house?
Who is this cowering girl
Crying in the darkness?
And this old man in a corner
Crying tears of blood,
Hiding himself from all the souls,
And trembling like a leaf?
The terrifying crop of my ancestors' fertile land,
Blooming beyond the window,
Makes a strange spectacle.
These houses,
These mansions:
Centres of generosity and charity!
Institutions of oppression and tyranny!!
All slaves and bonded servants, now dance here.

[Translated by Baidar Bakht and Marie-Anne Erki]

Ishrat Afreen

The Daughter Of Riches

Imprisoned in the haveli
the stalwart's darling daughter
crushed with fatigue
drained by dissatisfaction
laments the weather
feeling very tetchy.
Laden with the deep oppressiveness
waiting for the rain,
the atmosphere feels close.

Feeling suffocated, the girl
moves the golden silky curtains
a fraction
from the French windows
with a strange wistfulness
Sits quietly
With her face towards the fields
where the girls
chattering
clinking their anklets,
wearing pink and light green scarves
walk around with a swagger
for around their feet diligence has tied anklets.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

The First Prayer Of My Elders

From the womb of the night
A tiny ray of Light was thus born:
Night uncurled the lovely pink fists of Dawn
read her palm
whispered to the Morning breeze
and made the dew weep. A Star laughed
Moonlight smiled and went tripping away
Turning on her side, weakly
my mother started, then, keenly
she gestured
A flutter of movement, a whisper:
'Oh! Is that a girl?'Such deep sadness in that voice, O God!
The very first which wrote itself onto my hearing
In my very first breaths it stirred,
the bitter poison of defeat as I heard
'Oh, it's a girl!'
'A girl!'
'Is this a girl? Pray for her good fortune, then.'
It is still carved into my hearing
The first prayer of my elders.

[Translated by Rukhsana Ahmad]

Ishrat Afreen

To An Unfinished Man

This last experience made it clear to me:
despite your talents,
despite being tall and handsome as a man,
you're still a boy
who finds his peace in a girl's tears,
who seeks comfort in the pain that lies
in tattered butterflies
and the broken wings of turtle-doves,
who can destroy all ideals
for the playful pursuit of a whim.
How should I share with you my perception, my sense of things,
how should I take you with me on my mind's journey?
You're small compared to me,
you'll always be,
for I'm also the mother of my ancestors.

[Translated by Professor C M Naim]

Ishrat Afreen

Words

Words always appear small
but one may pile them up to form a home
that would suffice for the two of us
Words always look scattered
but one can glue them into a toy
that may pacify a hungry child
Words always seem meager
but one may save them for a yard of land
where one may plant a few dreams
Words, no doubt, cost a lot,
but one may turn them into instalments
to carry home a T.V. set
Words are, indeed, full of blessings
like the evenings at a saint's shrine
like the songs that sailors sing
like the ragged hands of the tillers
like a mother's prayer
like the children's calls

[Translated by Professor C M Naim]

Ishrat Afreen