

Fahmida Riyaz—The Pen As Political Weapon

Fahmida Riyaz, one of Pakistan's well known political poets, is currently living as poet-in-residence at Jamia Milia University, Delhi. She arrived in Delhi in March 1981, with her husband and two children, to attend a *mushaira* here. They decided to stay on for a few months "to get a breath of fresh air." In reaction, the Pakistani government declared them fugitives, which means that they cannot return to Pakistan as long as Zia remains in power.

In Karachi, Fahmida edited a political journal called "Awaaz" which had to be converted into a literary journal under threat of closure by the government. *Mushairas* or open poetry sessions, another forum for poets like Fahmida, were also banned. Fahmida says that not only creative writings and newspapers but even the Quran is censored in Pakistan. Portions which say that tyranny will end one day and tyrants will be sent to eternal hell, are censored out of the Quran. Yet, she says, a kind of code has developed between journalists and readers, whereby criticism of the regime and its oppressive measures is smuggled into the most innocuous sounding articles on such topics as the weather.

Fahmida faced a great deal of harassment in Pakistan, for her expression of her political views. Hardly a week passed without a policeman armed with a search warrant appearing on her doorstep. Columns and columns of abuse against her were printed in newspapers. Her second poetry collection "Badal Darida" which focused on women's oppression, was termed "pornographic" by conservative critics. At the time she left Pakistan, she was facing a charge of sedition which is a capital offence, and had been declared "a dangerous traitor."

Her development as a poet and an independent woman has been inseparable from her political involvement. She was forced into marriage by her parents but continued to write under her maiden name. After some years she divorced her husband, and later married Zafar Ujjan, a political activist of the under-ground People's Party. She has recently published two volumes of poetry "Dhoop" and "Pakistan '81" in India. These poems could not be published in Pakistan.

Extracts from some of her poems :

*My God, for what sin are you punishing me thus ?
What is this you have done to me ?
You have put a pen in my hand
In the midst of this all-encompassing darkness !*

*...They repeat to me over and over
Some inhuman words
In an inhuman language.
How shall I accept what they say ?
I cannot even understand it..*

*•••Only an unexpected sound
And the mind shrieks like a siren
Police !
And after that
Every knock at the door,
Every sound in the street,
Every footstep on the stairs
Brings only one thought to the head throbbing with pain
Police—Police—Police .*

*...I am walking along
And now night is falling.
Yellow messages of winter in the air,
Dry leaves fluttering in the wind.
The rays of the sun slanting
As if to reassure me
That the world is still rotating on its axis.
I have heard the distant flash and rumble
And now am wondering—
This world— is it really one world ?
A small world and a big world,
Second world and third world—
Why then ?
For years my world has rotated
Only on an axis of depression...*

Lullaby

*(for her daughter whose name Veerta means heroism)
Your face like a moon,
You, fragment of my life,
I keep on gazing at you,
I cradle you in my eyes,
Rock you in my arms,
Press you to my heart
Listen, star of my eyes,
Your mother's whole life
Was a flowing stream of tears,
With tears I wash your flower-like hands,
Your lotus jeet,
Anoint your eyes,
When I saw you my fears were stemmed
And I began to laugh aloud.
I have many hopes for you—
It seems like only yesterday,
That dark night when you were born
And I lay throbbing with pain, but your cry
Lit a lamp in my heart.
I can hardly kiss your blooming body,
I tremble with fear
I know a wolf stands at my door,
Eating my youth, drinking my blood,
A wolf fed on wealth,
Ruling the world,
He who has made it an offence in this city
To think,
To love— a terrible crime.
He who drinks the blood of souls,
Is waiting for you—
How then can I sleep at night ?
I lie awake in fear.
(Contd. next page below)*