

AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Final Report

Project Title: Poetry Across the Divide: Persianate Women Writers in the 20th Century

Author's Name: Sundas Amer

Dates for Project: January – March 2022

Location: Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad; Pakistan.

1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

My dissertation project is a comparative study of modern Urdu and Persian literature with an eye to the classical tradition. Specifically, I construct a conversation between Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-67) and Pakistani poet Perveen Shakir (1952-94). This project resurrects the historical relationship between Iran and the Indian subcontinent and the close ties between Persian and Urdu language and literary traditions. It investigates how remnants of these phenomenon persist into the modern period through the writings and lives of Farrokhzad and Shakir. Although Urdu has increasingly become known as the national language of Pakistan, my research brings it into international, comparative perspective through a dialogue with Persian. My project interrogates the close cultural, political, and social links between Pakistan and Iran, a relationship that is generally overlooked in favor of more polarized interfaces with India and Afghanistan. At the same time, my dissertation provides a close look into the life and verse of a prominent Pakistani literary personality and government servant Perveen Shakir. To this day, Shakir holds sway in the popular Pakistani imagination and generates narratives about poetic circles, the state, and concepts of womanhood. The curious similarity of her life and artistic reception to that of Farrokhzad's has been much discussed but never fully explored. My dissertation unravels the contours of Shakir's life and reflects on her positionality vis a vis her near contemporary Farrokhzad as well as the long lineage of Muslim women poets the two are heir to. In this endeavor, it places Pakistan within the bounds and legacy of the historical Persianate complex.

My goals in Pakistan were to research the reception of Shakir and Farrokhzad within the literary and broader milieu of the country, obtain textual sources on the two not available in the United States, investigate the ways in which Persian survives in Pakistan, and explore links between the Iranian and Pakistani states. In Karachi, I interviewed representatives of the Iran Cultural Center about its history, activities, and how it has facilitated collaborations between the two countries. I spoke with poets Afzal Ahmed Syed, Tanveer Anjum, Zehra Nigah, and Fatima Hassan about their relationship with Shakir and their perspectives on her poetry. I visited the campus of Karachi University where Shakir received her Masters degrees and spoke to scholars about broader trends in Urdu and Persian literature. At the Arts Council library I was able to obtain out of print sources on Shakir. I also communicated with Shakir's erstwhile neighbors in Rizvia Society. In Lahore, I spoke with poets Amjad Islam Amjad and Yasmeen Hameed and scholars Athar Masood, Razaqat Shahid, Fatima Fayyaz, Nasir Abbas Nayyar, and Moeen Nizami, and Talat Altaf, friend of Shakir. These conversations yielded insights into the status of Persian literature and scholarship in Pakistan, Farrokhzad as she is read and received in Pakistan, and the literary relationship between Shakir and Farrokhzad. In Islamabad, I met with poets Iftikhar Arif and Kishwar Naheed, short story writer Mazhar

ul-Islam, the head of the Perveen Shakir Trust, Parveen Qadir Agha, and officers of the trust Ranaa Seerat and Razaqat Javed. Every individual I met was generous with their accounts of their interactions with Shakir as well as with any textual material they felt would be helpful for my project.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

Through the travel that AIPS so generously funded, I was able to acquire current, on-the-ground perspectives on my research topic that would not have been available to me via textual sources in libraries in the United States. I have a keener sense of the various dialogues around Shakir and Farrokhzad in Pakistan and their relationship with the feminist, progressive, and modernist groups of their time and beyond. This holistic engagement will allow me to place the two poets and their work within broader trends of reception and patronage. The connections I have made with poets and scholars in Pakistan will also allow me to help craft opportunities for greater engagement between the Pakistani and American academies.

I will use the sources I have obtained to write my dissertation chapters. I will also present the research outcomes at conference presentations and utilize my sources to craft journal articles.