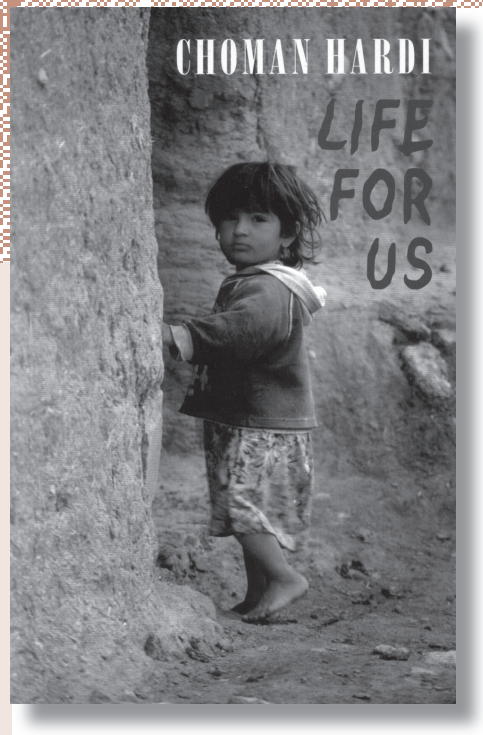


chomanhardi

poetry in translation



Kurdish poet **Choman Hardi** reflects on the process both of translating poetry and of writing in a second language.



I was living in the UK for a year when I started writing poetry in Kurdish. Till then I had read Kurdish, Persian and to a lesser extent Arabic poetry. I loved the classical Kurdish poets even though I didn't understand some of their poems. The 17th-century poets such as Nali and Salem use many Arabic and Persian words. The strict form is softened by the use of puns, playful language and **jinas**. This may be one reason why translating classical poetry into English may be more difficult. **Jinas** is using words that sound similar but mean different things. For example **jenan** ('eyes') and **jinan** ('heaven'), **Maliawa** ('name of a village') and **mali awa** ('may his/her house thrive') in Nali's poem: **Jenani wek jinan kirdim be mawa/ Habibay Maliawa mali awa** ('Like heaven she turned my eyes into a haven/Habiba of Maliawa, may her house thrive'). Modern Kurdish poetry was challenging in a different way. The bigoted and violent policies towards the Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria in tandem with the repeated collapse of Kurdish aspirations for autonomy has led to the creation of a wounded and complex identity. This is reflected in modern Kurdish poetry which tends to be more abstract and emotional than contemporary English poetry. Yet my own writing in Kurdish is a lot more down-to-earth than some of my contemporaries. This may be due to the influence of Persian poetry.

Modern Persian poets

At the age of 14 I moved to Iran and I started reading modern Persian poets such as Sohrab Sepehri and Forough Farrokhzad. At first I was surprised at the subject matters Sohrab Sepehri chose. He wrote about shadows, stones, light reflected in a pond. In this pure and quiet world you can hear the flutter of a butterfly's wings. It is said that other Persian poets criticised him for not writing about

more urgent political matters. In a world full of turmoil he carried on in his contemplations. His spiritual vision made me ache with joy. I think this was the first time I realised that poetry does not have to be about grand things, that any corner of the world offers so much to absorb, enjoy and think about. I was also deeply touched by Forough Farrokhzad, a woman poet who made unconventional choices and wrote about love. 'And all my wounds are from love,' she once said. Both of these poets died in their thirties.

Starting to write

I started writing poetry when I was twenty, years after reading and memorising poems. In line with Forough, I wrote about love and the burdens of womanhood in a patriarchal culture. Unlike Sohrab I write about the things that trouble me in the world, the injustices that I experience or witness secondhand. My style of writing has changed a great deal since I started about twelve years ago. When I first started writing I belonged to the Kurdish tradition and engaged with my poems in an intensely emotional way. Despite the simplicity of my poems in Kurdish, they are difficult to translate into English. In translation they seem foreign and strange, a little disjointed, and maybe ambitious.

Writing in English

After failing in translation I flirted with the idea of writing in English. There were many reasons why I thought this would be a good idea. At first my motives were political to a certain extent, wanting to raise awareness about certain issues that failed to attract much attention. But the transition happened naturally and gradually and, in some ways, was motivated by very personal concerns.

The year when I moved over from writing in Kurdish to English was 1999/2000. I was 25-years-old, I had published two collections of poetry in Kurdish and I had just got divorced from my Kurdish husband. In retrospect that year seems like divorcing not just a person but also a language and even a culture. For a while I cut ties with my Kurdish community to avoid being questioned about my divorce. I knew that at times I would be forced to explain my divorce, to give reasons why, to justify myself and to demonise the other. I decided to stay aloof for the time. I was also fed up with Kurdish victimhood, with the passionate political fights that dominated conversations.

Reading English Literature

Alongside the personal reasons came the impetus from reading English literature and getting an English education. I read indiscriminately, having no one who could guide me through the thousands of books on display. I sometimes wish that there had been a person who would draw me some cultural maps, telling me which authors and poets to prioritise in my reading. In any case I started writing

in English and I was surprised to find this a liberating experience. My English poetry is, of course, different from my Kurdish but writing in a second language provided me with a certain distance which is essential when writing about painful, personal and sensitive subjects. Time and displacement can provide the required distance and so does writing in a second language. Only in English was I able to write about statelessness, genocide, oppression and Kurdishness.

I have made peace with my community and language once again. It is true that I may not write in Kurdish again but I have started translating Kurdish poetry into English. I have also learnt to appreciate the Kurdish and English poetic traditions. I appreciate how privileged I am for having the four languages and enjoying poetry in all of them. Whereas in the past I felt lost between the different traditions, I now feel enriched by them.

Two Pages

1. Delivering a message

I was asleep in the middle of a pad
when he started writing on the first page.
The tip of his pen pressed down
forcing pale words into the pages below.
He wrote many versions that night
some very lengthy, others brief.

When my turn came he paused,
palmed his temples, squeezed his eyes,
made himself a calming tea.

She received me early one morning
in a rush, leaving her flat.
She ripped the envelope. Then, gradually,
her steps slowed down,
her fingers tightened around me.

2. Not delivering a message

All my life I waited for words –
a poem, a letter, a mathematical puzzle.

On March 16th 1988
thousands of us were taken on board –
you can't imagine our anticipation.

When they threw us out from high above
we were confused, lost in blankness.
All those clean white pages
parachuting into town...

Puzzled faces looked up
expecting a message, but we were blank.

Two hours later they dropped the real thing.
We had been testing the wind direction.
Thousands of people were gassed that day.

Choman Hardi



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