

## Which Shade of Blue by Shirin Razavian

*Reviewed by Lotfali Khonji*

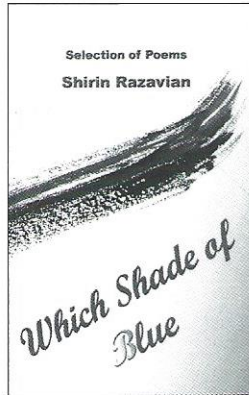
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This is an impressive dual language collection of poetry by Shirin Razavian who fled Iran because of the censorship and lack of freedom of expression. Robert Chandler, who translated some of the poems into English, writes about Razavian's work: 'Shirin writes with absolute directness and lack of pretension [...] When I read a poem like 'Water Song', the images are so vivid that I almost forget that I am reading in a foreign language [...] Shirin enters wholeheartedly both into the world outside her – as is clear from her political poems – and into the world within her'.

In *Which Shade of Blue* we find a selection of Shirin's Persian poems and their English translations by Robert Chandler. In addition, a number of poems in the second section were composed in English by Shirin herself. These include 'Dying Young', 'Wine, Bread and Blood' and 'Rainbow of Memories'. In some of the poems in the English section, such as 'Trap', the poet depicts the society around her in the manner of a painter. The same holds for poems that refer to the years the poet has spent away from her homeland. In 'Wine, Bread and Blood', we read:

*I have danced in the festival of life  
But it was a gypsy dance!  
I had no land  
I had no home*

There are also nostalgic poems, such as 'Dying Young', fuelled by exile.



Poems in Persian fall into two categories. In the first, we find modern poetry while the second consists of lyrics and other types of classical poetry. Here too, Shirin is sometimes in Britain and sometimes in Iran, in particular in poems in which she refers to Zahra Kazemi and other victims of political oppression.

The translations are quite good. Considering that poetic imagery is not the same in the two languages and that idiomatic expressions are also quite different, there are inevitable cases of difference in meanings. In the poem 'I'm Afraid', we read:

*I'm afraid I won't say;  
I'm afraid I won't  
let my tongue run away with me.*

In the Persian original we find a reference to, literally, fearing that "my head remains green and my tongue colourless". This is an allusion to an idiomatic expression that runs, literally, like this: *a red tongue will lead to the loss of a green head*, meaning "talking boldly or carelessly can lead to one's demise". So, the meaning being conveyed is "I fear that I might become a silent coward, interested only in saving my own skin". A better translation could have been: *I'm afraid I might hold my tongue to save my head*. But perhaps I am only nit-picking!

Classical Persian poetry, from the works of Ferdowsi and Khayyam to those of Sa'di and Hafez, is well represented in the English speaking world. However, the same cannot be said of modern Persian poetry. *Which Shade of Blue* provides a welcome addition to the modest selection of modern Persian poetry accessible in the English speaking world.