

POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATION: AGHA SHAHID ALI

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Exile and self-exile are largely involuntary; postcolonial migration often blurs the distinction between choice and necessity. The postcolonial migrant moves to a new place without shedding the trauma of having left a 'home' to which return is possible only in dreams, memory, and writing. For the migrant poet, displacement and relocation acquire the literal and figurative dimensions of translation. The poet invokes, elegizes, or commemorates the places and languages left behind from the perspective of the place and language to which migration has occurred, as part of the manifold consequence of linguistic colonialism and postcolonial mobility.

An aspect of the homology between postcolonial migration and translation is illustrated by the work of Agha Shahid Ali. Born in Kashmir, he began publishing in 1972, leaving for the USA in 1976, where he published several books of poetry, from *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) to the posthumous *Call me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003), and translated the Urdu ghazals of the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-84) in *The Rebel's Silhouette* (1991).

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949 and grew up in Kashmir. He was later educated at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar, and later on in Delhi University. He spent his childhood in Kashmir, and after completing his studies from Presentation Convent School, Burn Hall School and University of Kashmir he moved to Delhi, to do his post-graduation from Hindu College, where he taught also. From there he moved to U.S. He was awarded a PhD degree in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984, and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona in 1985. Agha Shahid Ali's life and work were similarly affected by Agha his state of being an 'exile' He moved from Kashmir to Delhi, and from Delhi to Pennsylvania.

Shahid has always been in exile, ever since he started writing poetry and ever since it has been recorded. Most of his poems are marked by the sense of sorrow and that of loss. Exile is always an undesired state for every human being. Nobody likes to live away from their homeland and from their loved ones. But Shahid went to Delhi to do his post-graduation. And since that time, all the poems that he composed, most of them bear a sense of sorrow and also a sense of loss in them. Thus, we see that 'Exile' causes 'Grief'.

From the perspective of the migrant, places and persons from a vanished past are recollected as diminution, objects seen sharply, but seen from the reverse end of a telescope. "Snowmen" describes them as metonymies, heirlooms from sea funerals (*The Half-Inch Himalayas* 8). The poet's appetite for an irrecoverable past stretches backwards to the courtly days when Urdu poetry and music experienced a Golden Age. For Ali this age shows an accord between desire and fulfillment for which there is no equivalent in the present. Historical figures like the vocalist Begum Akhtar, the poet-emperor Zafar, and the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz become archetypes of romantic ardour. The present becomes the mere occasion for evoking nostalgia for their achievements. "The Dacca Gauzes" celebrated for their sheer transparency in his grandmother's youth now become the morning air pulled absently by his mother through a ring (*The Half-Inch Himalayas* 15-16). "A Call" is poignant with the sharpness of a paradox. Images of a home that is impossibly distant keep breaking in upon consciousness repeatedly, and unavailingly, as memory:

I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me,
the cold moon of Kashmir which breaks
into my house(54)

The poems from *A Walk Through The Yellow Pages* (1987) image dereliction as the obsessive phone messages of someone desperately alone, ears abuzz with dead or distant voices, unable to reach through to the other side. Telephony is the medium that fails, providing no more than the static of its resistance to the tokens of presence that would be a voice at the other end, abridging silence.

I prayed, 'Angel of Love,
Please pick up the phone.'
But it was the Angel of Death.
He answered, 'God is busy.
He never answers the living.
He has no answers for the dead.
Don't ever call again collect.'(v)

Walter Benjamin invoked the fable of the Tower of Babel in "The Task of the Translator" (1921/1923), an essay prefacing his translation of Baudelaire into German.

Discussing this fable, Jacques Derrida asks:

Can we not, then, speak of God's jealousy... he scatters the genealogical filiation. He breaks the lineage. He *at the same time* imposes and forbids translation . Translation becomes law, duty, and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge. (*Difference in Translation* 170,174)

Derrida reminds us that Benjamin's notion of the translator's task corresponds to 'duty, mission, task, problem, that which is assigned, given to be done, given to render' (*Difference in Translation* 176). The obligations enumerated by Derrida from Benjamin apply to Ali's sense of vocation. The unavailability of communion (with God) or connection (with parent, community, friend, home, or country) is like the impossibility of full translation. Reversed, it becomes a denial of univocity, and thus a sanction for plurality of speech as dialects, of poetry as translation, of exile as migration, and of guilt as restitution.

Ali's poetry is more eloquent about the cost in pain rather than the fulfilment of translation. The vocabulary of loss has many synonyms in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991). It is always already too late to rescue the cities of the imaginary homeland. The poet lives in a world of ruins. Its narratives are forgotten histories. In "Resume", the poet is "the secretary of memory" (87). "In Search of Evanescence" depicts him as one of the few "Survivors of Dispersal" (44), afraid that "A language will die with him (44), guilty of the 'erasure of names' (56). "From Another Desert" discovers a natural affinity between the Muslim poet and the language of Islam, "Arabic-the language of loss" (73). He can find no way back to his country, though another poem, "Leaving Sonora" insists that he is 'faithful, / even to those who do not exist' (29). A later poem, "I see Chile in my Rearview Mirror", expands the sense of being 'forsaken, alone with history' (97), and of being rendered into a 'shadow' (48) to include other alienated peoples, regions, and histories, that keep looking for recognition into the blankness of mirrors (96) and into what 'Notes on the Sea's Existence' images as blank reflections, images 'not mine' (89). The entire volume is an epiphany of being-in-loss. The one possibility that might translate this misery into hope is the restoration of the tragic to the heroic, as when the fabled love between the Punjabi pair of star-crossed lovers, *Majnoon* and *Laila*, is re-visioned by the poem "From Another Desert" as the dedication of a 'committed revolutionary for 'the revolutionary ideal' (65), whose union would bring back 'a god' 'to his broken temple' (66).

Faiz Ahmad Faiz was the modern master of the Urdu ghazal. In 1951, he suffered imprisonment on a charge of conspiracy against the military regime in Pakistan. Periodic imprisonment and exile under successive dictators inspired poems that have earned Faiz recognition as a poet comparable, to 'Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo and Ernesto Cardenal in the Western hemisphere, Nazim Hikmet and Yannis Ritsos in the Middle East' (*The True Subject: Writers on Life and Craft* 66). Ali equates the despair of Faiz at what had happened to the Punjab because of the Partition of India and Pakistan with his own despair over Kashmir. The task of the translator acquires a special purpose in this dereliction.

The poet reacts in a stunned way to the ruins of the dream of nation. Likewise, Ali comes

to the valley of Kashmir (as ruined by the notional entities calling themselves India and Pakistan) with a sense of historical belatedness. Faiz had long dreamt of an original unity, a fiction kept alive only in poetry, like a world of perpetual possibility. For Ali, the time of translation cannot hope to sustain this possibility, except in diminution. Thus Kashmir becomes a map or a postage stamp or a lost address from *The Country without a Post Office* (1997).

Ali's poems measure the difficulty of retrieval in translation. In a poem that alludes to a phrase from Emily Dickinson, "Some Visions of the World of Cashmere", the poet can still remember 'the face of a man who in dreams saves nations,' but it is also the face of a man who in dreams 'razes cities' (*The Country without a Post Office* 36). The first of several poems titled 'Ghazal' and collected in *The Country without a Post Office* (1997) describes the poet as 'A refugee from belief' (40). According to Walter Benjamin, translations relate to an original by placing themselves as cognates not to the original, but to what "is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning" (257). In Ali's later volumes, as exemplified by "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan" the metaphor of deterritorialization shifts its ground from Kashmir to Lahore and from Asia to Amherst.

By drowning his Kashmir in the pool of many losses, the poet pluralizes loss. All specific losses metamorphose into a language of pure loss, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. Poetry fulfils in metaphor the task Benjamin assigned the translator: It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work' (261). Ali's poems liberate loss into the pool of languages, from Urdu to English, from Kashmir to Amherst. The sharing across languages and cultures does not diminish the loss, but it makes it participate in a wider mourning. That is the peculiar gift of Ali's diasporic writing: the translator recreating his losses in another tongue, in other places, among other peoples.

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