

The Homology between Postcolonial Translation and Migration in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali: A Study

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ABSTRACT:

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 the 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. The present paper concentrates on the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and the aspect of homology between postcolonial migration and translation from the works of Ali who left the Indian subcontinent for a life in USA. In Ali's poems, places and persons from vanished past are recollected as diminution, objects seen sharply, but seen from the reverse end of a telescope from the perspective of the migrant. 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 fulfilment for which there is no equivalent in the present.

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I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the root of the old one
a new one has sprung.
(Grace Nichols, 'Epilogue')

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.

This paper proposes to illustrate the homology between translation and migration from the work of a poet who left the Indian subcontinent for a life in the USA, Agha Shahid Ali (1947-2001). The relationship of Ali's poems in English to his translations is antithetical, like the relation between a photographic image and its negative. The activity of translation seeks to recover from an invoked and imagined past a plenitude that is lacking in the poet's own life and times.

A different 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).

Ali made himself into a poet laureate of loss. The poems from his first two volumes are replete with rituals of mourning, burial, and cremation. A later poem personifies this tendency as a 'Desperado || in search of catastrophe' (1991: 30). In the title poem from "The Half-Inch Himalayas" (1987), the Kashmir valley of his childhood is imaged, from a distance, through a picture postcard. 'this is the closest | I'll ever be to home' (1987: 1):

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.

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' (1987: 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 fulfilment 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 (1987: 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
(1987:54)

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.

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.

(1985:170,174)

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' (1985: 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 a 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 '**Résumé**', 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' (23). 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, in Ali's estimation, to 'Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo and Ernesto Cardenal in the Western hemisphere, Nazim Hikmet and Yannis Ritsos in the Middle East' (1993: 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. In 'Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the translator acknowledges that his hands 'turn to stone':

In the free verse
of another language I imprisoned
each line-but I touched my own exile.
(1987: 33)

Ali recognizes an affinity between Faiz and himself in respect to the shared sense that suffering is seldom, perhaps never, private' (1991: ii). One of the most sombrely moving poems by Faiz marks an air-raided blackout during the India-Pakistan conflict of 1965, 'Black Out. 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' (1997: 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. (Benjamin 1996: 257). In Ali's later volumes, as exemplified by "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan", the metaphor deterritorialization shifts its ground from Kashmir to Lahore and from Asia to Amherst:

'in each new body I would drown Kashmir' (1997: 91).

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' (Benjamin 1996: 260). 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 recreation of that work' (1996: 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. If "Translation promises a kingdom to the reconciliation of languages' (Derrida 1985 200), the postcolonial migrant inherits this kingdom, and in his poetry the self is reconciled to loss, exile and migration to home, memory to pain, hope to despair: all translated into, and as, language.

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