

BALI SAHOTA

Deciphering the Promise of Tradition (Student Review Article)

ZAMIRUDDIN AHMAD. *The East Wind and Other Short Stories*. Trans. and with an introduction by SHAMOON ZAMIR. Karachi: Oxford University Press, Pakistan Writers Series, 2002. 207 pp. Rs. 250.

National by Default

ANYONE even slightly familiar with the fractured and rough reality of Pakistan's history would understand the difficulties attending the presentation of this nation-state as an organizing category for a series of translated literary works. The experiences of the majority of authors in the Oxford University Press's Pakistan Writers Series bring into relief some of the problems at hand, yet the thrust of translation under the rubric "Pakistan" may risk the occlusion of these very issues. Certainly the notion of the nation in Western literary contexts and in the English-speaking world at large unfurls a coherent background of polity, geography, ethnicity and even destiny. It is before this very national backdrop that fictional narrative, character and theme become readily intelligible and places like the frontier for the Americas-in-the-making become simultaneously imbued with literary and political meaning over the course of the nineteenth century. Think, for example, of the significance of the western wilderness for James Fennimore Cooper's novels of Manifest Destiny or the driving force to conquer the Argentine plains in the allegories of development produced by the likes of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento or José Hernández. Likewise, it is the *mise-en-scène* of the nation-states' sovereignty and ultimate horizon of possibility which ties together self and society in terms of "typicality," as Georg Lukács suggested, in the classical historical novels of Western Europe. Yet, it is exactly such an expansive organizing framework of the nation that Pakistan seems unlikely to afford for its writers, or

at least for the writers presented in the Pakistan Writers Series. This incapacity of the Pakistani nation to sustain a meaningful context is perfectly patent in the case of Zamiruddin Ahmad's short stories, for these short stories always elide the device of national framing. They do so by either working nostalgically across international borders, making quintessentially Indian sites such as the Ganges River the locus of narrative, or by working into the recesses of domestic and intimate experiences. Indeed, these very recesses of intimacy and domesticity evoke in these stories what is simply and starkly human—and thus alight exactly where it should make no difference where exactly the story takes place.

Thus translation in the old mode of "*les belles infidèles*"—translations that seek to erase the foreignness of the original and thereby make it accord as much as possible with the expectations, times and frameworks of the translating language—would miss out on the peculiar difficulties and differences of bringing such literary works under the national rubric of "Pakistan." That *The East Wind and Other Short Stories* of Zamiruddin Ahmad appear to have only a tangential or tenuous connection to Pakistani history and politics is all at once surprising *and* understandable. It is surprising since Ahmad had responded quickly, like so many other young Muslim intellectuals of his generation, to the call to establish a new nation-state and he came to occupy high profile positions in the bourgeois nationalist press and state-run television throughout the fifties and sixties. He had, in other words, felt compelled to leave family members, inheritances and heirlooms behind in Uttar Pradesh's Farrukhabad after Partition to establish himself squarely within the trajectory of the new nation-state's program of development. So much were his desires and energies consumed by the making of the new Pakistan—he went there, as he claimed, to join the Pakistani Air Force—that his early literary ambitions were seemingly shelved away for a future date. For these reasons, one would expect the national frame common to so much of the aesthetic production of contemporary emerging nation-states to at least impinge concretely upon his literary creations, if not provide their imminent context or content. Yet it is perfectly understandable that such would hardly ever be the case for Ahmad's writings, and at most the politics, ideology, geography or images of Pakistan would figure only negatively or remotely, if at all, in his oeuvre. This is perfectly understandable since the continuing suturing of self to nation had become less and less feasible in Pakistan as the decades wore on. Initially the experience of Pakistani citizenship must have seemed a distant abstraction when he, soon after reaching post-Partition Karachi, landed a position as Associated Press of Pakistan's foreign correspondent in Delhi. Upon return to Pakistan in 1956 to work for the famous English daily *Dawn*, the military dictatorship of

Ayub Khan clamped down heavily on the press, making work as a journalist increasingly claustrophobic and unbearable. By the late sixties, the combination of political turmoil and the failures of constitutionalism in Pakistan overwhelmed his success as a prominent intellectual in the media world and made opportunities for a life abroad all the more attractive. An offer to work for the BBC took him to London for most of the next two decades, and from that point until his death in 1990, Pakistan must have figured primarily as a painful memory of dashed hopes and frustrated desires. Since his most celebrated stories—the ones translated and presented in *The East Wind*—were composed either before the period of full residence in Pakistan or after the political despair and immigration to the West, it is no surprise that the national framework is most conspicuous in its absence.

Now the impossibility of finding one's own self encompassed within the narrative of the nation is surely, in our contemporary context, experienced more as a boon than as a curse. How much more this would be the case in Pakistan must be fairly obvious. For here, as Abdullah Hussein suggests, the national narrative is experienced more often as a prison house than as an open frontier: "[In] our society, there is so much polarity that every successive regime appoints its own historians and tries to rewrite history."¹ Considering the potential disclosed by the impossibility or—what amounts to the same thing—the abandoning of the national framework, Ahmad's entire oeuvre and especially the compositions collected in *The East Wind* provide a compelling point of reference for thinking through carefully what such a state of national un-belonging has come to mean broadly today. The very fact that his short stories now appear in elucidating translation opens up an entire constellation of questions which can bring together seemingly disparate contexts of twentieth-century immigration, cosmopolitanism and exile with specific issues relating to the fortunes of Urdu literature, especially with respect to its new contexts of relevance, reception, and appropriation. The question becomes, in other words, what kind of role, situation or context does Urdu literature come to occupy through translation into English? Towards the end of this review, I will suggest some answers that a reading of Ahmad's *The East Wind* can provide. To anticipate, my sense is that works such as Ahmad's prove invaluable in the contemporary global context of entrenched fundamentalisms, both Eastern and Western, Islamic and Christian, in providing a way to reach beyond the creature comforts of

¹Quote appears as the epigraph in Hussein, Abdullah, *Stories of Exile and Alienation*. Trans. by Muhammad Umar Memon (Karachi: Oxford University Press, Pakistan Writers Series, 1998).

particular religious identification for an affirmation of the harrowing difficulty of living ethically and politically—an affirmation, that is, of the mutually conflicting demands of different ethical and political orders upon oneself. In short, Ahmad’s work indicates the disorientation-effect of imagining orders other than those that presently exist under the rubrics of nationality, religion or regional belonging—and such imagining is his work’s very promise.

Traditions, Aesthetics and Selfhood after Travel

The stories selected and gracefully translated by his son Shamoon Zamir for *The East Wind* constitute a particularly compelling cross section of Ahmad’s entire oeuvre. They emphasize the themes that drew his attention over a number of years in various ways and to which he became ever more sensitive as distance increased between himself and his origins. These themes—femininity, loss of innocence, and domestic estrangement—recur often in his stories and distinguish intimacy as the center of gravity of his work. Ahmad’s literary world of intimacy is full of spatial intensities, secret languages, subtle bodily communications, physiognomic particularities, veiled conflicts and internal turmoil—all of which delineate the form of life to which Ahmad became attuned the more it receded from his actuality. This thick intimate sphere of his memory is counterpoised by the thinness of the public domain, which is generally indicated by vague gestures or, if it is dealt with squarely at all, is marked by total negativity, as in the haunting allegory of state violence in “The Still River”:

You can’t see their faces. You can’t see the face of the hanging man either. You can’t see anyone’s face—not even one of the many people who are coming out of the six narrow streets and moving with hesitation towards the island. There are so many people but you can’t hear the sound of anyone’s footsteps.... (120)

Politics for Ahmad, unlike the ethical domain of private existence in his stories, seems a senseless spectacle, replete with chaos, violence, repression and unremitting darkness. The distinction drawn then between private and public—ethics and politics—is thus essential, even foundational, to Ahmad’s oeuvre. It must certainly have informed his early self-distancing from the Progressive Writers’ Association, known for its public didacticism and interest in a politically oriented aesthetic of revolution meant to sweep away such a distinction altogether. The private/public divide to which Ahmad clings is parallel, isomorphic, or perhaps even basic, to his aesthetic: the internal distancing of the ethical from the political is

matched by his notion of the aesthetic as an internally coherent fragment pried loose from social existence.

Just as Ahmad's self-enclosed private realm is the source and repository of meaning vis-à-vis an incredibly entropic political domain, his aesthetic is also self-reflective, regularly referencing works, literary figures and tropes of Urdu's past in a manner that reveals an urge toward constancy. Furthermore, the drive towards self-referentiality and intertextuality is taken to particular extremes in Ahmad's oeuvre, and the manifestation of such an internally generative meaningfulness seems to have partially motivated the selection, translation and ordering of the stories for *The East Wind*. For example, allusions to events in the first selection "First Death" appear in the final selection "On the Banks of the Ganges," an unfinished novel posthumously published. This has the effect of not only bringing things full circle, but also of circumscribing the work of literature from that of ordinary life. Ahmad's literary works are meant to have an autonomous life all their own. It is interesting to note too that though Ahmad was well-read in modernist works of Western origin and translated pieces by the likes of Edmund Wilson, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre into Urdu, the allusions and explicit references in his stories seem restricted to the Urdu tradition. It is as if the works of Western literature could be subsumed within Indic or Islamicate literary traditions and forms, and only the latter need serve as the ultimate soundboard for one's own creative expression. Moreover, though mention is made of Urdu prose writers such as Faiyāz 'Alī, Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Rusvā and Sa'ādāt Ḥasan Man ō in Ahmad's stories, it is particularly the poetic tradition in Urdu that seems semantically rich enough for deriving the proper themes, metaphors and frameworks for his narratives. It came as no surprise then to learn from Zamir's introduction that Ahmad had been considering writing what ultimately became *Khāṭir-e Ma'sūm* (In the Name of the Innocent), a critical study of the sexuality of the beloved in Urdu poetry divided up according to classical literary genre, for some twenty years before its publication. What such literary learning and activity amounts to in terms of Ahmad's aesthetic is by no means negligible: the major themes mentioned above—femininity, loss of innocence and domestic estrangement—are themselves encompassed within a quintessentially modernist thematization of literariness itself. That is, the ultimate thematic horizon explicit in many of Ahmad's stories is the very possibility of literary creation, which is based on the opposition between reality and representation, literality and figurality, denotation and connotation, factuality and counter-factuality, transitivity and intransitivity, and so forth.

The abundance of literary allusion in his oeuvre provide clues to understanding the significance of his aesthetic and the meaning of other themes in his work, and can, as I will indicate, return the reader back to

politics via the ethical dilemmas of his characters. It becomes obvious that literacy and the institutions of Urdu literary culture play an essential role in Ahmad's narratives. Thus, it seems that one must first decode what literary expression and activity mean to him (or his characters) in order to understand what his own literary creations themselves might signify. What does it mean, for example, that the wayward aunt in "The Path of Righteousness" "would either just sit in the kitchen and hum romantic *ghazals* or she would give the cook a scolding for no good reason and boss him around; other times she would be cracking jokes with him" (17)? Or what should one make of the fact that "the poetry of calamity must, after all, have contributed something" (31) to the tension between the narrator's mother and aunt? Why at the very beginning of "Unheard Lament" is the narrator "lying on the covered roof-terrace, reading a story by Manto in a special short story issue of *Saqi*" (53) while his cousin "is likely to be holed up in some closet with a salacious novel" (54) and his mother is "reading aloud Fayyaz Ali's second novel" (*ibid.*) before his grandmother? Again, why in the selection from "On the Banks of the Ganges" does an episode simply involve the character Sajid's attempt to piece together various fragments of a ghazal? A string of such questions could stretch quite some distance. The answers to them provide the key to comprehending the underlying ideology, if you will, of Ahmad's aesthetic and clear the path towards its politics. Furthermore, this aesthetic sheds light upon the recurring themes: the aporia that ensue from the conflicting ethical demands on the characters drawn toward domestic estrangement, for example, or the loss of innocence upon realizing that a mother or father is no longer the ideal one imagined, or the elusive nature of women in an age of Urdu literature in which reaffirmation of masculinity through temporary cross-dressing is no longer so easily feasible as it was in the days of Rañgīn.² Women, especially, lend themselves to figurative readings in Ahmad's stories. Of the eleven pieces collected for *The East Wind*, six are focused almost exclusively on women and in the rest they feature prominently. In "The Path of Righteousness," for example, women appear initially from a distance, through the eyes of a naïve narrator which take in and record their everyday world's happenings in a manner that imbues them with allegorical mystery. Women are central to this mystery—its very source—and even seem to govern it. They are neither supplemental nor do they accompany any other entity, but rather everything, even masculinity, seems to be possible on account of their onto-

²The reference is to Sa'ādāt Yār Khān Rañgīn (1755-1835). For the politics of masculinist tranvestism in Urdu literary history, see C.M. Naim, "Transvestic Words?: The Rekhti in Urdu," *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 16, pt. 1 (2001): 3-26.

logical primacy. Against the stock characters of the ghazal and other literary forms in the tradition which are often evoked, Ahmad's stories put forth the women characters' irreducible, somewhat delicate and always vulnerable, uniqueness. Thus the conclusion of "Unheard Lament" can only come across as poignantly tragic by way of the female protagonist's concrete incommensurability to the abstract feminine figures of the literary tradition. She serves as a muse for the character Rusva and is the object of longing for his friend, the narrator of the story, and both of them conflate her actuality with the figures and tropes of the literary tradition, selfishly turning her into their personal plaything despite her dire situation. The conclusion is a brutal testament to her own desperately eked out autonomy. Somehow or other the ontological autonomy that Ahmad posits for his female figures is threatening to the male characters, and seems to account for the latter's tendency toward misogyny. "Dry Rains" presents even more clearly just such an autonomy. Its unnamed widow protagonist exists apart, tending to the room she shared with her late husband, uninterested in giving into the pathos or desires for remarriage expected of her. Instead the widow extends her generosity to all those who come to her, especially to those with problems, expecting nothing in return. Such autonomy and unpredictability comes across once again, smashing the ego of the male character, in "The Other Side of the Mirror." The title of the latter conveys much about the position of the female character in *The East Wind* and Ahmad's oeuvre in general. In brief, the centrality of the female figure can be read as a metaphor for Ahmad's basic aesthetic theory. Many of the narratives presented here seem to unfold, in the guise of femininity and womanhood, what the aesthetic essentially symbolizes for Ahmad in the first place: a primary ontological category that is obliquely situated to social existence; one that is forever vulnerable to destruction but which provides, in its autonomy, the essential image of fulfillment and gives to everyday life its form and essential intelligibility.

This phantasm of the aesthetic haunts the narratives of despair and dejection, sensations which seem to have constituted a frequent zone of inquiry for Ahmad. The aesthetic manifests itself, as mentioned, through the regular ghostly allusions to a tradition of literariness, by the essential integration of literacy and literary institutions into the story's plots and by Ahmad's own elaboration of narrative form. The gesture of self-fulfillment or unalienable existence of the aesthetic provides the means for hope, or at the very least stands as a counterpoint to the melancholy resulting from the loss of innocence. Hope is captured figuratively, for example, in "The East Wind." A boy poses a simple homework question to his father in earshot of both of his mutually estranged parents, whose mutually conflicting answers are marked by either a tough literalism or by a desire for infinite semiosis. "'Abba, what does *purva* mean?'" (76). The boy's mother, who

seems to have drifted away from his father towards adulterous fantasy, responds in his father's stead by giving its denotative meaning and variants: "The wind that blows *from* the east, or rather, from the lands of the east. *Purab*, the East, *purba*, *purva*, *purvai*" (*ibid.*). As the boy's exercise is to make sentences with such words, he goes on to write, "If the wind is blowing from the east it is called *purva*" (*ibid.*). His father protests against such tautology and his mother picks up on it in her own revision, but only to let its figurative capacity dissolve in silence: "The east wind has the effect of making even the saddest person happy for a little while, and" (77). When the boy looks up to hear more, the mother snaps back, "That will do. Cut the 'and'" (*ibid.*). It is only toward the end of the story, after the boy's mother returns from an emotionally charged encounter with the type of man she longs for, that the definition of *purva* opens a new future for the couple. The child reports what another person told him: "when the east wind blows, old wounds start to hurt" (84). The possibility of further alienation or reunion is at stake in the choice between a literal or metaphorical interpretation of *purva*, between its simple denotation or its imaginative elaboration, for even if it is taken to mean the reopening of old wounds, at least then such wounds could heal properly. The story concludes with either the denotative or connotative interpretation hanging in the balance. Like many of the other stories in the collection which conclude in uncertainty, ethical dilemma or simple aposiopesis, the underlying theme of literariness holds out a sense of plenitude, congruence and fulfillment in absentia. Like the meaning of *purva* in "The East Wind," the meanings of the aesthetic forms that constitute the Urdu tradition are only partially disclosed, only partially appropriate, and their allegorical unfolding in narrative—as if from an enigmatic couplet—is hardly meant to provide any simple moral lesson. It suffices that this partial emanation of the tradition's meaningfulness be capacious enough to incorporate new themes and continue to shed meaning on everyday life. Ahmad's art avoids, in other words, any tendency toward sanctimony, moralizing, and self-righteousness. Instead, this art places demands upon the Islamicate tradition of Urdu that it proffer a particularly unsettling image of life without any moral or ethical guarantees.

The ethical perplexity that marks Ahmad's stories—that aspect of his work which clamors constantly for the reader's recognition—can lend itself to a political reading. The politically symbolic aspect of his literary activity becomes quite evident when this activity is seen in its productive context. It is useful to note that seven of the eleven selections in *The East Wind* were written after Ahmad's return to writing in the early eighties. By then the possibility of going back to Pakistan became fairly remote, a neo-imperialist onslaught against racial and religious minorities in Britain was

heating up, and yet, on a personal level, a difficult period of “silent isolation,” as Zamir puts it, began to subside (xxi). This moment of return to writing was on an historical plane, pregnant with a whole variety of political developments that have only recently blown up in our midst. Ahmad’s immediate Anglo-American world had come under the hegemony of Reagan and Thatcher. On the American side, this brought to prominence born-again Christianity, militarism and, in the wake of the Cold War, a notion of civilization clash. In the United Kingdom, events such as the Falklands War abroad and, on the home front, the Rushdie Affair fueled imperialist nostalgia and fanned strident patriotisms. Simultaneously, after the Iranian Revolution especially, the manifold practice of Islam began to collapse into a singular image of terror as new puritanical strains began to co-opt and manipulate the faith for political ends. During these years of reaction, Ahmad’s sense of exile seems all the more acute. He found no stable employment but rather took on different writing assignments that took him across vast swaths of space, leaving him with no solid foothold within any particular nation. In light of these developments in his midst, Ahmad’s return to the remote intimate spheres of the old world of his memory cannot simply be seen as his opting for apolitical fantasy, as such an option might have appeared in earlier contexts of his life. Rather one can read it as a return to an Islamicate past to reclaim a different legacy than the one his present had bequeathed him. And in a context when a whole variety of facile identities were being put on the table, when political conflicts were locked in antinomy and the contemporary world’s ugliness began to seep into its classical traditions, the attempt to rethink a critical aesthetic theory of one’s own inherited tradition in order to arrive at a more productive politics can be considered, at the very least, worthwhile.

Translational Effects

In cases such as this, much obviously depends on translation, in both the restricted and more open senses of the word. The task of translating from the original Urdu was surely entrusted to the right person, for Zamir’s efforts at conveying the spirit of his late father’s literary expression above and beyond the dead letter reveal a sense of heavy filial indebtedness. The work obviously consumed much contemplation and demanded some careful experimentation. The “small shifts and changes in the rhythmic patterning of the ordinary,” or the “stylised quality of dance-like repetitions and variations within a narrow repertoire of movements and sounds” in the original, remained, as Zamir avers, “the hardest things to get right” (xxxv). The strategy employed to get across his father’s aesthetic

sensibility is to keep the translated prose as unencumbered of notes as possible, and only provide those tidbits of information that would be obvious to the original intended audience, but not necessarily the uninitiated audience, and that only at the very beginning of the story. The effect is to allow the narrative to seduce the reader in a language that is literary in its starkness, not too unfamiliar in its locutions and, like the original works, generally oriented toward temporal movement. The lexicon of the translation makes much use of Indian words incorporated into common British English. Neither such Indian words nor the occasional English word employed in the original Urdu is italicized. Things like snack items are glossed over and idioms which would jar the ear if literally translated are generally poetically rendered. So an idiom relating to vocal tone such as “*ghuṣṣē kī talvār*” (literally, “the sword of anger”) Zamir translates simply as “edge of anger.” In the original, social hierarchies come across quite subtly through orthography, for the lower the speaker’s rank, the less likely the Urdu words they utter will be spelled correctly. This original feature of Ahmad’s language would surely be difficult to convey in translation without violating such nuance. All particularities aside, perhaps most revealing about the translation and the linguistic field to which it aims is the borrowing of the language named “Ob” from Don DeLillo’s novel *The Names* for the secret language spoken by the women characters in “The Path of Righteousness.” Such a choice reveals the degree to which Ahmad’s work in this translation is meant to enter as seamlessly as possible its corresponding field of late modern literary English.

Whatever translational effects the work may have in the sense of broad culture-transformation and further text-generation remain to be seen, but the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of this work would mean different alliances and solidarities than exist presently and these in turn depend upon the formation of new aesthetic, ethical and political sensitivities. □