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Postcolonial Poetry, Anglophone Translation: Sites of Resilience in Shiv Kumar Batalvi's *Luna*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the political and cultural positioning of Punjabi poetry within the postcolonial state, engaging with Fredric Jameson's theories of "third-world literature" and Aijaz Ahmad's critiques of national allegory. Focusing on the marginalization of Punjabi within Pakistan's language politics where Urdu has historically been privileged through colonial and postcolonial state policies the study explores how vernacular traditions serve as sites of resilience and anti-colonial resistance. At the center of this inquiry is Shiv Kumar Batalvi's classic Punjabi verse-play *Luna*, which reimagines the ancient legend of Pooran and Luna. Through a critical comparative analysis of Batalvi's original text and its English translation by B. M. Bhalla, this paper evaluates the ideological stakes of foreignizing versus domesticating translation practices. By subverting patriarchal tropes and aligning the tragedy of Luna with the suppression of the marginalized mother tongue, Batalvi's work transforms myth into a vessel for pre-colonial and anti-colonial resistance. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how sensitive Anglophone translations can rescue "doubly shadowed" regional literatures from obscurity and integrate them into the landscape of world literature without erasing their distinct cultural matrices.*

Keywords: Shiv Kumar Batalvi; *Luna*; Postcolonial; Translation Studies; Punjabi identity.

Introduction

***Must a man waste half a lifetime
 and a million words
 before he can say things
 the way he wants to say them?***

-- Taufiq Rafat, "Reflections," *Arrival of the Monsoon*

Fredric Jameson has famously argued that the literatures of the third world are allegories for nationalism, a claim that was equally famously contested by Aijaz Ahmad who, with the specific example of the history of Urdu literature in British colonial India, claimed that Jameson's generalisation did not extend to all non-European literatures. This paper proceeds from Ahmad's reply to initiate a discussion of the place of Punjabi poetry in the postcolonial state, where the historical forces that have shaped the postcolonial consciousness in a certain morphed way have pushed Punjabi to the periphery. Since this consciousness is always a multilingual and translingual consciousness, translated literatures remain at the centre of language politics, and debates around foreignising or domesticating translations help ground the questions of nationhood, community, language, and identity.

Jameson posits that the character of "third-world literature" is "non-canonical," which I read as his attempt at finding anti-colonial tendencies in this "third-world literature" (Jameson 65). He valorises the "resistance" inherent in such literatures, and his categorisation of it as "third world" does not appear derogatory or condescending to me. In fact, he specifically acknowledges the limitations of his classification (66-67). However, Ahmad takes exception to Jameson, and traces the aporia of definitional inconsistencies in Jameson's argument,

questioning the very divisions of first, second and third worlds that Jameson predicates his reading on. Significantly for my own discussion, Ahmad considers the history of Urdu in India as his example of a “third-world literature” that is not a national allegory. Ahmad claims that the rise of the Urdu novel form in British India did not address issues of colonialism and imperialism, and as such these novels were not allegories for nationalism as Jameson’s argument would presume and propose them to be (Ahmad 21). While Ahmad’s reading of Urdu fiction as not overtly addressing colonial issues is largely accurate, notable exceptions to this essentialisation exist, but are not the subject of this paper. For the sake of establishing this context, the Progressive Writers Movement in Indian literatures, especially in the Urdu short story and poetry, was a movement that had a Marxist, nationalist, and anti-imperialist ideology. It was the predominant representative literary movement of the 1930s to the 1950s, and most of the recognised Urdu literati of that period adhered to this ideology in some form or the other. The evidence of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist awareness in the well-known and widely-read (at least in the Urdu-speaking population of South Asia, and also in anglophone translation) short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and the revolutionary poetry of Marxist activist Faiz Ahmed Faiz would at least seriously dispute the claims of Ahmad (and later Aamir Mufti) about the absence of anti-colonial consciousness in Urdu literature. Perhaps Ahmad, himself a noted translator of Urdu classical verse, has misread the importance of these counter-examples.

Ahmad does successfully demonstrate that Urdu in colonial India was a language patronised by the British. Several other scholars have also traced the history of Urdu as a language patronised by the British colonial administration. One such notable scholar whose work has consistently engaged with language history and language politics in Pakistan is Tariq Rahman. He provides evidence, among other arguments for this imperial nature of the language, that the rise of Urdu as the language of print culture in British India led to the increased publication of Islamic religious material, thereby resulting in language-based religious mobilisation, which suited the colonial empire (Rahman 97-134). Urdu and its supposed Islamic heritage, therefore, are actually rooted in colonial policy.

The importance of Urdu’s religious identification is reflected in the debates around its status, and more so in what Alyssa Ayres describes as “the contradictory roles that language plays in the creation of national identity in modernity” (Ayres 3). Since it is the language attributed with the task of unifying the linguistic and religious identity of the Muslims of north India, the historiography of Urdu has always been politicised, first because the British promoted it to counter Persian as the inherited official language of Mughal India, and then in relation to Hindi in post-independence India. In Pakistan, it was adopted as the national language, but never implemented until a Supreme Court order in 2015 reminded the state that it had promised to promulgate Urdu as official language in the unanimous constitution of 1973.¹ Even before that, though, the separation of Bangladesh from the union of Pakistan in 1971 over the language issue indicated how fraught the decision to enforce Urdu had always been. The residents of the erstwhile East Pakistan had been agitating since 1952 for the recognition of

¹ Article 251 of the constitution of Pakistan reads thus: (1) The National language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencing day. (2) Subject to clause (1), the English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.

the Bangla/Bengali language as a national language in acknowledgment of their numerical majority, alongside the state-declared Urdu, which they considered to be the language of a minority. This agitation, and the subsequent language movement in what was East Pakistan, which led to the declaration of independence of Bangladesh, highlighted the instability and unpopularity caused by the forced choice of Urdu as the language of official and state discourse. This resulted in the state, for a while, proclaiming both Urdu and Bangla/Bengali as state languages, bringing the language movement to an end, but the seeds of separation had been sown (Rahman 95).

With these instances of how Urdu's presence has polarised language politics in the postcolonial state of Pakistan, one must ask: what has been the status of other regional languages in this context? While Urdu has been variously presented as the other of Hindi and Bangla, as the replacement of Persian and English, and as the alternative to Arabic for Muslims, other regional languages, or mother-tongues have not received much scholarly attention. Being the largest provincial and linguistic unit in post-Partition Pakistan, and in its role as the ethnic language of what is seen as the ruling elite of Pakistan who also happen to be in numerical majority (Ayres 71), Punjabi has had a complex relationship with Urdu. As Tahir Kamran has pointed out in his important commentary on Hafiz Mehmood Sheerani's history of Urdu titled *Punjab Mein Urdu*, colonial identity politics necessitated that Urdu be located "in juxtaposition to Punjabi" in colonial India as part of the project to consolidate north Indian Muslim nationalism and turn it into Muslim separatism whose discourse was advocated in and through Urdu. Kamran argues that the British succeeded in removing Punjabi, which Sheerani had argued was the predecessor of Urdu, by "simply denying it the status of a language" (Kamran 18-19). In independent Pakistan, Christopher Shackle suggests, the lure of Punjabi extends to the less privileged: "It is much easier to become an office bearer in a Punjabi organization than in a *respectable* Urdu one" (Shackle 259, emphasis added). This has made Punjabi a language now associated with the masses (Mirza 225), a mother-tongue without any social capital.

While scholars like Rahman and Kamran have argued that Urdu was promoted at the cost of regional languages like Punjabi, which was one of the largest regional indigenous languages of north India, thereby raising the possibility of a Jamesonian argument for the existence of a national literature or resistance literature in Punjabi, Farina Mir's seminal work contends that it is more productive to consider that Punjabi contained a streak of "resilience" during the colonial period. Mir reads the classical Punjabi *qissa* (an epic romance) tale of Heer and Ranjha through its various iterations in pre-colonial and colonial India to argue that the Punjabi *qissa* tradition was not interrupted by colonial interference; rather, despite the colonial government's policies of promoting Urdu at the cost of Punjabi, Mir finds that the *qissa* tradition presented a continuum, and more importantly, for Mir, it was the site of resilience if not a full-fledged resistance (Mir 17-25). While all these scholars focus on the colonial period and colonial policy regarding the relegation of Punjabi to the margins of the nation-state, there is little scholarship that tackles the issue of Punjabi in the postcolonial states of India and Pakistan. For the purpose of this paper, I treat the India-Pakistan subcontinent in its pre-colonial, pre-independence unity, thinking of undivided Punjab as one linguistic and cultural unity, where culture is inextricably intertwined with linguistic identity. This qualification is necessary since the poet I consider here was an Indian national, and his Punjabi verse was written in the Sanskrit-based Gurmukhi script, which remains largely inaccessible to Punjabi speakers and readers in Pakistani Punjab since they are trained in the

Arabic-Persian Shahmukhi script. The poetry has recently been transliterated into Shahmukhi, making it more accessible to Punjabi readers in Pakistan.

In his introduction to *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty attempts a critique of European historicism. He contends that “the achievement of [the coloniser’s version of] political modernity in the third world could only take place through a contradictory relationship to European social and political thought” (Chakrabarty 9). This contradictory relationship, according to Chakrabarty, was based on the coloniser’s historicist belief that the coloniser and the colonised were at different stages of history, implying different stages of evolutionary development. Chakrabarty argues that such historiography was ill-informed. Mir’s work on the Punjabi *qissa* tradition also suggests that the colonially subjugated Punjabi literary formation was well aware of its historical position, and articulated its sense of history through its continuation of the precolonial *qissa* of Heer and Ranjha during the colonial period.

In an important analysis of colonial influence over the inner and outer domains of social life in colonial Punjab, Tahir Kamran has argued that the colonial administration influenced all segments of life. Arguing against Partha Chatterjee’s contention that the inner domain of the colonised Bengalis was not influenced and retained independence from the colonial master, Kamran finds that the language politics that pushed Urdu to the forefront of discursive politics in Punjab was evidence of the permeation of the inner domain (Kamran 12-13). I argue here that while the language politics that promoted Urdu as the British colonial language of choice in colonial Punjab were indeed a strong influence in the lives of the colonised in Punjab, it is also simultaneously true that the colonised Punjabis did retain some part of their inner pre-colonised selves. For Mir, this is reflected crucially in the persistence and popularity of the Punjabi *qissa* tradition in the colonial era. Moving on from the narrative tradition of the *qissa*, I find evidence in the postcolonial Punjabi poetry of post-empire poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi that suggests a strong questioning of the historicist colonial division. Like E. M. Forster’s metaphorical recall of the ancient caves of India as evidence that Indian art predated notions of British colonial assumptions of European art being superior, Batalvi recalls that the river Ravi, or the classical oral tale of Luna and Pooran, predates the colonial conceptions of stagism in the progression of history.

The historical tale of Pooran and Luna is located in the Punjab in its various iterations, foregrounding the claim that the legends and myths of an ancient language (which in this case is Punjabi) predate the stages of history that are proscribed by colonial modernity, an exemplar of what Sara Kazmi in writing about Punjabi’s place as a working-class language has described as “a vessel for channeling pre-colonial traditions of resistance” (Kazmi 115). Qadiryar’s *Pooran Bhagat*, for example, was translated into English by Taufiq Rafat, the man who was simultaneously crafting what he called the “Pakistani idiom” of English poetry, and who acknowledged the narrative link between the Greek myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra and the myth of Luna, a young second wife to a much older king who then falls in love with the king’s young son but is jilted by him and exacts revenge on him by having him killed by his father. In an introductory commentary on Qadiryar’s narrative, Najm Hosain Syed notes that the story was well-known before the poet penned it, but became so synonymous with the poet that “when forced out of recognition, both had to go together” (Syed 73). Ancient myths with resistance undertones thus converge in an English translation/version.

Batalvi’s verse-play opens with two narrators “making love” in a forest. I wish to point out here that the Punjabi text does not suggest anything as crudely obvious as what “love making” suggests to an English-speaking audience, i.e. a euphemism for sex. B. M. Bhalla’s translation

into English, I contend, domesticates the Punjabi idiom for an English-speaking audience to a point where Chakrabarty's idea of a provincialized Europe, as projected in a foreignizing translation which remains true to the essence of the original language/structure/form, is entirely abandoned. Admittedly, Bhalla does not once claim to be attempting either a domesticating or foreignizing translation, but for the purpose of the argument I undertake here, foregrounding the importance of a foreignizing translation helps underscore that such a translation would be the site of a resilience and resistance that may indeed be considered to be desirable in a postcolonial or anticolonial ethos, for which my larger work around Punjabi and anglophone literatures would be making a case. For Walter Benjamin, the translator "must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language," an ideal that Bhalla's translation falls short of (Benjamin 81).

When the female narrator Natti asks, "What is this beauteous place? / And what is this ravishing river," the male narrator Suterdhar replies, "This place is Chamba, O, fair one, / And Ravi, the water-way, / Which is called Aravati, / In its divine sway." The river Ravi, known in ancient Sanskrit mythology as Aravati forms a link between the past and present for Batalvi. It serves as the grounding site for his translation of the existing mythological frameworks into his contemporary setting. The river represents the continuation of history, and thus the resilience that Mir finds in the persistence of the Heer Ranjha tale. In Rafat's translation too the river figures as an image: when Pooran goes to pay respect to his step-mother, she cultivates desire for him that betrays her status as "mother," desire that "makes a river/flow backwards" (Rafat 66). For Luna, the young "mother" denied conjugal pleasure by an old husband, the desire for Pooran brings out the contradictions of social standing, which in Najm Hosain Syed's reading translates into her belief that "the flow of a river does not appear to be natural" (Syed 76). The flow of history thus also does not appear to be natural in its understanding of colonial and postcolonial history.

To posit a counter-translation to Bhalla's version, I render this exchange thus: Natti asks, "Which land be this, so beauteous? / Which river this be," to which Suterdhar replies, "This land be Chamba, o beauty, / Ravi this river be/ Which Aeravati is called, / In the myths of old." While my concern in this paper is not with arguing that poetry remains essentially untranslated, it is important to stress that translation may be misleading. If the purpose of analysis is to find anticolonial/decolonial paradigms, it becomes especially important to be sensitive to the nuances of the source language/poem. Natti, for instance, does not append any adjectives with the "river" in the Punjabi original, but Bhalla adds the adjective "ravishing." Since the adjective does not add to the meaning of the original or qualify it in a way that may make some interpretative intent visible to the audience, the translation could well work without this imposition.

Batalvi further roots the narrative in its contemporary surroundings in Kot Sial (modern Sialkot in Pakistan). Suterdhar notices that "This land is enchantingly fertile, / And the breeze intoxicating." The fertility here alludes to the colonised nation's fertile agricultural lands, but the land is also fertile because of its rich linguistic heritage. Batalvi is aware of the medieval poet Qadriyar's version of the myth, and it is this "enchantingly fertile" land of Punjabi literary history that he sows his epic in. The land indeed is so fertile that "The *dhak* flowers have run wild," suggesting the resilient and resistant nature of the colonised land. The untranslated *dhak* also suggests a site of resistance against colonial linguistic impositions. This is a rare instance of Bhalla foreignising the translation, but I argue that this is involuntary foreignising. Wherever he has been able to find English alternatives, he has not chosen to keep original nomenclature. In the absence of a glossary, and given the uniqueness of this instance, this

suggests that the translator just could not find an appropriate word in the target language. This raises the importance of the issue of reliability linked to the assumption of omniscient knowledge by the translator in both source and target languages. The *dhak* flower is commonly known as flame-of-the-forest.

Whereas the narrative impetus of the Hippolytus and Phaedra myth remains in Hippolytus's plight, and whereas the character of Pooran is the focus of Qadiryar's version, Batalvi relocates the logos of the narrative around Luna. Unlike the conventional, patriarchal reading of Pooran as the victim of Luna's manipulation, Batalvi's version critically displaces the blame from the woman's jealous wrath to an evaluation of a society where her status as woman and untouchable had been at the heart of her repression. Her crime is that she expresses her desire. Batalvi's *Luna* becomes the tragedy of Luna where she is the victim of a crime perpetrated by the patriarchal society. Batalvi counter-translates the myth in his own version to express the resilience but ultimate helplessness of Luna's desire. Puran's mother, Ichran, against whom Luna has been brought as a second wife, laments to her father that "People should learn to do, / Without a daughter," because when "You give birth to a daughter, / You lower your stature, / You compromise your honour." While Ichran mourns for herself here, and asks her father not to send her back to her husband's home where the presence of a new favourite wife brings Ichran misery, this also echoes the plight her rival faces. When Luna proposes to Puran, her stepson, her pain echoes that of Ichran. Puran insists on calling Luna "mother" while she pines for him. "Puran, Luna has a tender mother's heart, / But she is by that love terrorized, / Which without consent is thrust, / And moves in her womb like dirt." This is a powerful indictment of a woman's condition in the Indian patriarchal society. Batalvi translates the myth in such a way that it becomes clear that due to the actions of King Salwan, not only do his wife Ichran and their son Puran suffer, but Luna also suffers, both in her false accusation against the man she desires, and in her forced tie to the man she has been married to. Luna is thus, for Batalvi, the motherland, the land of Chamba, or the river Ravi, which originates in mythic times, but is colonised and ruled over by others. Luna is also the Punjabi language, a mother-tongue abandoned by her own sons.

These brief examples are meant to present the case that despite its history of conflict with the state-sponsored languages, Punjabi has a rich history of resistance. Translations of Punjabi literature, where done with sensitivity to the issues of translation, would contribute to contemporary discussions of postcolonial and resistance literatures created in abandoned mother-tongues, and to the creation of a world literature that assimilates the various worlds theorised by Jameson. These translations, while empowering a language "doubly in the shadow" through the mediation of a global language, also enable the Punjabi political space to enter the space of anglophone world literature. As Nasia Anam has argued in the case of Bangladesh, anglophone literature is a political site for "subverting the hegemonic, totalising impulse of global English by counter-intuitively *exploiting* its expansive reach as a historic language of empire and the current language of global

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