



Book Review

Afsar Mohammad and Shamala Gallagher. (2022). *Evening with a Sufi: Selected Poems* (Transl. from Telugu). New Delhi: Red River. Pp. ix+98. Price: \$14.99. ISBN 9789392494161. Softcover.

Epsita Halder
Jadavpur University, Kolkata
Email: epsita.halder@gmail.com

Afsar Mohammad's *Evening with a Sufi* is a collection of poems culled from the poet's various volumes of Telugu poetry, translated in English by him and Shamala Gallagher. When a poet is active in selecting a set of his own poems and translating them, the distance between the original and the translated versions gets more blurred than usual. Gallagher qualifies Afsar Mohammad's poetry as "particularly Muslim, particularly post-partition Indian, and particularly Telugu (p. 73)." Gallagher is reaffirmed by David Shulman, eminent historian of Telugu literature, in his note on the poems as he says, *Evening with a Sufi* is "profoundly rooted in a specific landscape (p. 81)." Mohammad and Gallagher, the poet and the translator respectively take up the challenge of translating the three particulars embedded in Mohammad's poetry—Muslimness, post-Partition experience of the subcontinent, and Telugu selfhood—that offer readers with regionally imbued intonations of the Telangana region without either compromising on the located-ness of poems, or their capacity to speak beyond linguistic-cultural borders. The call of the *muezzin* for prayer, the grieving over the massacre of Prophet Muhammad's family in the battle of Karbala, the teardrops of a Sufi that fly like sparrows, the Ramadan fast—all specifically Muslim motifs—emerge from the rocky landscape of Telangana to become transmitted as universal experiences of violence, pain, loss and homelessness. The poet speaks of the pain of the Other, and this character unfolds or expands itself to speak of the pain of humanity itself. The embedded mystical aura of Afsar Mohammad's words conjure up an image of suffering and pain that is existential, and viscerally articulated to reflect his own ruminations about being that marginal Other. At other times his words express his own compassionate journey towards becoming that marginal Other. The personal and the personalised gets transformed into a poetry of the universal, inextricably merged with the political and global. Afsar Mohammad's Telugu poetry carries tremendous intersubjective emotions and connections that allow it to remain situated inside a region, while transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries at the same time. When translated into English, it becomes world poetry.

There is universal appeal in Afsar Mohammad's intimacy with his protagonists who dot the landscape of his poetry—a *fakir*, a Sufi, a *shehnai* player, the fasting community during Ramadan, a father who brings the community together with his call for prayer, and a mother who is sometimes Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. All these protagonists become translated through poetry in ways that are made relevant across multiple temporalities and generations. These poems embody the transference of the wound, of hunger and anxiety, and the suffering of the Other—subjectivities inhabited by the poet, and communicated with readers, to enable readers to step out of their limited selves and to carry these wounds, this hunger and anxiety of the Other(s) forward. That is why Afsar Mohammad's Telugu poetry transcends the cultural-linguistic barriers of the region. This intersubjective journey—between the poet and his Others, between the poet and his readers—presupposes an orator. An orator is a presence deeply entrenched within Telugu ritual-performative-folklore and its scribal worlds; he is the voice that continues to haunt the narrator of Telugu literary modernity. The orator makes his way here, into poems, as a messenger, as an interlocutor, a storyteller, and a tormented soul, with poems exuding the empathetic power of the intersubjective 'I'. The 'I' that reflects and becomes the

positionality of the Other, invokes lost myths and memories that offer security to those in troubled times, as it simultaneously expresses devotion for the Prophet Muhammad. Afsar Mohammad's voice in his poetry speaks of the experiential world of that intersubjective 'I', transmuting itself into a transcendental realm through identification with the battle of Karbala and the grief of Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima on losing her sons Hasan and Husayn. In the first poem *Name Calling* (pp.15-16), the voice of the poet speaks either from a marginal position, or from a critical self-reflexive appropriation of the Other's position, making it impossible for the reader to take any other position themselves, apart from that of the empathetic listener. The relation between the poetic self and marginal selves, in this act of conversation goes beyond any self-Other binary.

Usman, the protagonist of the first poem is an outcaste. He becomes the signifier of all the marginalities that the poet encounters and experiences himself by identifying with Usman, sharing his wounds, his pain, and his peripheral position. The marginal and the outcaste as the signifier repeats itself in the next poem: *A Piece of Bread, a Country, and a Shehnai* (pp. 17-20). The poem articulates hunger and the absence of bread as a political matter. What sounds like the most familiar phrase of the Indian Constitution: "we the people of this country," (p. 17) recur often, where "we the people" are held responsible for not arranging for any food for the Others. Thus, the poems are also marked by a critical orientation, and are unforgiving about the play of institutional power, but without compromising on lyricality and non-referentiality. Despite their starkly political nature, these poems never leave the mystical realm introduced through Islamic devotionism that haunts the narrative in the form of mythical reminders. Political sensibilities defy any essentialism and go beyond gendered truth when becoming "a shattered genderless dream that multiplies (p.19)." The poem resonates with the pain of Fatima. The subjective confinement of the speaker is momentarily lost, only to be immediately multiplied and transferred to readers. Muslimness, otherwise so apparent in tales, symbols, and allusions, are expressed here in poignant terms when describing how the Prophet Muhammad "squeezed his body into a qibla (p. 18)" to allow himself to be one with his daughter Fatima's grieving. This expands subsequently to refer to other incidents, and to the anguish of current times. The *shehnai* player's dream of bread and his frail body brings back memories of Karbala, creating new possibilities of seeing traces of persecution embedded in the battle, expanding the symbolic capacity of the dream to indicate the battlefield of the nation (p. 19).

*Your dream of bread
is not far from her battlefield
anymore.
Your body at last on the rope-cot,
the last pinning glance of the war,
they are the same dream
one restlessness, one violent shriek.*

Otherwise considered to be an ode to the legendary *shehnai* player Bismillah Khan, this poem readily becomes an allegory for the many *shehnai* players, who come from specific marginal milieus and castes, as their talent and artistic contributions go unrecognised. As they fill the air with absolutely enthralling high pitched musical notes that only a musical instrument such as theirs can produce, their *shehnais* are unable to fetch them any bread. By subtly underlining such stories of marginalisation as the failure of the country: "We the people of this country, of that country, can make anything but a piece of bread for you (p. 17)", the poet transforms the personal into the political and vice-versa, to mount a strong allegorical criticism of postcolonial India. In the next poem, *No Birthplace* (pp. 21-22), the reader feels the anguish of homelessness. One is tempted to read expressions like "From somewhere, saffron hands are

cutting away the land under my feet (p. 21)” as poignant codes, an irresistible and intriguing image of postcolonial India. Images float and gather in the readers’ minds as they continue reading the words: “from somewhere, the dust of crumbled domes flutter onto my body, building up a tomb (p. 21).” As the dome is crushed, the poet finds himself and a community in him, in necrophiliac Bombay, where dead bodies are strewn in the dirt, in the aftermath of riots. Amid the heap of mutilated bodies, migration does not sound akin to the exilic energy of abstract homelessness. Rather the choice of words that expresses “citizenship of a vacuum world / migrant in any time (p. 22)” qualifies for the anguish of belonging in the frame of nationalist politics where one does not need to shift countries to become a migrant; rather one can be dispossessed in the very country of one’s birth. Such expressions compel the reader to search between the lines and words to hear a collective howl about holding on to their lands. The reader shudders with the power of acute pain that drips from the poetic voice that reclaims its birthplace on behalf of the community that was denied it (p. 22).

*I don't ask for half a kingdom or the state of Anga
I don't have a tongue to ask for my own torn nerves back.
Does the corpse have some land to hide in?
Any small plot is enough, a shade over the head...
Don't spit in my mother's womb-water.*

Such direct, brutal images expose the barbarism of power, and establish a demand for justice. The sense of belonging, connection with one’s homeland and the fraught question of citizenship are more nuanced than ever and personalised in the next poem *Third World* (pp. 23-25). The expression exhorts readers, not to stay in the realm of illusions, reminding them of the Citizenship Amendment Act that asked marginal communities to prove their citizenship by providing documents. The poet says in the prelude of the poem “Now we are left with a handful of signatures on the frail documents of fallen leaves (p. 23).” This expression recurs in the poem as the poet tells the story of the toiling women in his region, of how their ownership over their own land is arbitrarily snatched away (p. 24).

*Padma, Padma,
did you know all the berries
we stole from your field
never belonged to you
nor your father nor mother
nor our village nor our land,
no one asked anyone anything.
We are documents signed
and sealed forever...
they are happy with their signatures
but they can't see
our broken feet.*

Poem after poem, childhood memories are braided with an identification with the Other, and through the recognition of marginality. It grows so inclusive that the outcaste can be recognised: the pariah that Usman was in the first poem can now be recognized as the untouchable Dalit from the poem, *Outcast's Grief* (pp. 37-39):”

*I am looking for the cities
that were buried
under the weight
of the Vedas.*

*I need to trace
the black bodies crushed under
your iron feet
So that the mornings will be brightened
by a black slogan.*

And as the protagonist comes up from the fields lush with his toil and tears, from the fringes of the village where he was “cast away in the pitch dark (p. 38),” he tells the poet about how he is scared of the white flowers. He mockingly asks how long the poet will continue his slavery of white poems. Then all these colour codes go back to the beginning of the poem where the outcaste, the poetic persona, declares (p. 37):

*But from now on
this story will be written
by the severed thumb of Ekalavya.*

As the first section of the poem ends, the chronicle of violence and persecution transcends identification and location and claims to be the tale of any land anywhere in the world in *The Wall Next to Death* (pp. 40-41).

*In the wheel of killing and self-killing
a movement is the crumbling of a hill
here and gone are equal.
Time moves in a million directions
but they're all the same.*

So, what will the poet do? At the end of the book's first part, it becomes almost imperative for the poet to declare that the speech of the outcaste, the history of the land, the anguish of marginal communities can only be archived in poetry, by exiting elitist and 'white' poetry. The poet journeys through many languages, as he says in an interview published at the end of the poetry section in this book, is to finally return to Telugu as his language of creation. Now, as the voice of the oppressed, he wonders about how he endured the violence of dominant orders. He wonders about those systems of power that attempted to destroy his persona, his history, and his expression. Now real poetry will have to be about slave-worlds, in slave-words, and smeared with the blood of torture. Hence, the poet's return to his mother tongue is not an aesthetic choice alone. The poet merges with the rebel-activist to speak on behalf of the marginalised and persecuted collectives.

The poetic persona continues to walk on the trails outlined by the first section, marked by the name of the first poem in the second section *Walking* (p. 51). However, his political articulations of resistance start attaining a serene mystical aura in what are seeming ramblings: “I will take every straying path / don't ask me where I am going (p. 51).” The expressions are indirect, and more symbolic. As the poet identifies himself with teardrops, it opens up new possibilities for the emergence of a poetic-aesthetic language that is sensorially akin to mysticism. In the backdrop of the quiet depiction of an evening: “When the trees erase their shades / when the sky dries out its final sunshine (p. 55)” and the tired alarm fails to awaken him, there is a self-conscious emergence of the poet in Hyderabad city in the poem *A Rain Lost in Hyderabad* (pp. 55-56) that is almost like the self-consciousness of a Sufi awakening in a time when the city has altered his sense of self. From the unfixity and ambivalence of “a dreamless sleep, a sleepless dream (p. 56)” of Hyderabad, the poetic focus draws itself towards the *qibla* where everything that is physical—the belly, the feet, the hands—get obscured, fused into one transcendental point—the Kaaba Sharif. One almost encounters a neo-Sufi position in Afsar Mohammad's poetry, in the emersion of the self and self-effacement, which articulates

contemporary anguish. The theme of violence does not dissipate entirely from the poems. The poet's momentary tranquillity gets shattered as the unforgettable memories of violence, loss and pain return. The *qibla* points to the river of blood where quartered arms lie rotting. This image of severed hands transports us to the battle of Karbala, where Husayn's half-brother Hazrat Abbas' hands were cut off by the enemy for bringing water to the thirsty children of Husayn's family. But the *qibla* points everywhere else as well, perhaps to Kashmir, and perhaps even to Palestine, as a testimony written in blood.

Evening with a Sufi is truly a piece of world poetry, carrying a testimony of personal anguish and violence from the margins with it, that weaves the individual together with community. The idea of the wound and the wounded is intersubjective in the poems, and the positions of the self and Other overlap in what is a language of compassion, an ethical call for justice for the Other. Strands of acute anger, a sense of dejection and an existential quest unravels throughout the length of the poems, proving that Afsar Mohammad is a stalwart of global poetry that is composed in Telugu.