Some Brief Reflections on the Function of Myth in Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without A Post Office*

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It is almost thirty years since the publication of *The Country Without A Post Office* (henceforth *Country*), years which (sadly) have done little to make the violence and suffering Shahid Ali depicts in the book outdated or historical. The most recent violence brings an undesirable relevance to poetry which many people would prefer to date historically. Earlier this year – and in the wake of the bombing of Gaza – I watched Elia Suleiman's *The Time That Remains* (2009), and felt the similar, uncomfortable sensation of watching art act out and comment upon a series of injustices it factually pre-dated.

And yet, in some ways, *Country* tries its best to transcend history, whilst simultaneously engaging with it. It is a paradox which lies at the heart of the pleasure the reader obtains from its pages. On the one hand, we are plunged into the landscape of Kashmir: Zero Bridge, Shalimar gardens, Dal Lake, Gupkar Road; on the other, Ali draws us through a world of literary ghosts which *Country* palimpsestically dances with: Mandelstam, Eliot, Rilke, Mann. One moment, we witness horrifying scenes of violence – a burning tire drip-dripping on the back of a young boy, an Indian army officer bragging about how effective his torture is on Kashmiri boys; the next, we are speaking to the Fates, or dwelling on the union of Shiva and Parvati, or reflecting on the sacrifice of Iphigenia. One of the aims of this brief essay will be to try and understand what the nature of this duality is in Ali's collection, and to tentatively argue that not only is this ambivalence central to the aesthetics of Ali's poetics, but that myth has a large role to play in the success of this project[1] (Benvenuto 263).

Both myth and history lie at the center of *Country*. Ali plays with Hindu/Greek myth, draws on stories of both Biblical and Quranic heritage, weaving them into his text. At the same time, there is a specific focus on history – and even pre-history – where the narrator moves into the distant (Harappan, pre-Aryan, even geological) past, as though to make a point anterior to all ideology. In "At The Museum," the speaker stares at a bronze statue of a servant girl, and reflects on the intention of the sculptor, and the feelings of the sculpted. Throughout *Country*, there is this delight in the attempted recollection of distant, inarticulable time,

1 Even in interviews, Ali has talked of his obsession with certain figures of Greek myth – for example, with Eurydice.

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most obviously as a haven from the politically-cursed present, but also as a place where the ancient rhythms of suffering can be detected then, as now.

Vinay Dharwadker, in an essay on Indian-English literature, is upfront about the status of Ali as an "unapologetically elitist" writer:

> But the new immigrant and itinerant writers of Indian origin come overwhelmingly from privileged-class backgrounds on the subcontinent as well as outside it. The biographies of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, and Amitav Ghosh, for instance, show that their migrations and traveling identities do not cross or disturb class boundaries as they move back and forth between the upper levels of Indian society and the upper levels of British, American, and European society. (258)

To some extent, our consideration of the role of myth in Ali's work has to negotiate, however tangentially, the issue of his biographical context; that is, the larger question of what it means for a Kashmiri to write poetry about Kashmir within the pages of the *Yale Review* and the *Denver Quarterly* (of the twenty-six journals which had previously published the poems of *Country*, every single one was North American). Ali's own relationship to modernism – to T.S. Eliot, in particular, and the modernist preoccupation with myth – also brings to mind some of the politically reactionary, even in its extremes fascistic, aspects of modernism and the university-educated readership it chose to perform for.

What is the function of myth and myth-allusion in *Country*? Perhaps the most obvious purpose it serves for Ali is to internationalize the text; by describing the liquid of a goblet as "rum-dark" (Ali 80) (parodying the Homeric formula "wine-dark"), or in the very next line by invoking Noah and the Ark as a predicament for Srinigar in 1990, Ali transcendentalizes the political situation of the text and creates a wider series of referents and parallels for the injustices he examines within it. This strategy is initiated almost provocatively in the very first poem of the collection, when Shahid Ali writes in intimate parallel with Osip Mandelstam's "The Blessed Word" the opening poem, also named after Mandelstam's 1920 piece. Mandelstam's anti-Soviet, anti-communist sentiment in the poem – he speaks of saying a "prayer in the Soviet night" – chimes, intentionally or not, with Ali's own description of military occupation by a bullying state, even if the anti-communist subtext put Ali at odds with other, more left-wing anticolonial critiques of colonial (in this case, colonially-inherited) power. The Soviet occupation of nearby Afghanistan, up until a few years before the events of the poem, would also have been a context that would have overshadowed any Kashmiri use of Mandelstam.

In other words, if the invocation of myth – other people's myths, everybody's myths – internationalizes the poetry of *Country*, it does so in ways which are sometimes at odds with one another. The ease with which Ali brings in Islamic and Persian tropes – not just Abraham and Karbala, but also Leyla and Majnun – suggests that his own autochthonous culture is not the only, or even primary, warehouse of tropes and motifs he is drawing on.[2] Aamir Mufti examines the poet's work in his own *Forget English!,* drawing attention to the way Ali modifies and re-writes the ghazal in English, keeping to its constraints (the *takhallus* or common third person self reference at the end of each ghazal, for example) whilst innovating and re-configuring it within a wider international framework – a practice Ali himself memorably referred to as "unfaithful fidelity" (Mufti 182, 184). This ambivalence towards the Indo-Islamic world – indeed, towards the faith which inspired it – is what makes *Country* so interesting for outsiders (and I most certainly am, with no pretensions to the contrary whatsoever, an outsider). There is an oscillation between local and foreign lenses, which uproots the book and sets it floating free across contexts, somewhat like "The Floating Post Office" we encounter in the middle of the book, a deliverer of messages but with no fixed abode. Readers steeped in Faiz, Mir, Ghalib and Lal Ded will pick up the references placed there especially for them; devotees of Hopkins, Apollinaire, Trakl, and Auden will also find, in different places, mail for them too. Occasionally (as Yeats discovered), a symbol can hold two or more meanings at the same time – the moon can be Chandra, it can be the orb Petrarcan lovers such as Sidney invoked in addressing their mistresses, it can also be the crescent of Islam; Ali appears to delight in the proliferation of meanings and connotations each symbol provides as he goes (to follow the logic of "The Floating Post Office") from houseboat to houseboat.

Amit Chaudhuri, writing on the writer Nirad Chaudhuri (but also on the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt), has described this process as a kind of Freudian *fort-da* movement: "All his life, Chaudhuri strove both to express his Bengaliness and to escape it" (49). We flee the familiar, are drawn to the unfamiliar, and then – in an irrepressible cycle – we return to the familiar in a defamiliarized form, and the circular process begins all over again. In Ali's case, however, this is not so much a circle as a spiral – not merely a ping-pong movement of endless dissatisfaction between opposing poles, but rather a more all-encompassing, self-expanding, self-enriching movement of thought as the poet's literary voice expands its wavelengths, incorporating and digesting previously disparate influences and texts. It would not be outrageous to say that,

2 Upasana Dutta has written of Shahid Ali's "exactingly global sensibility" which "pulls Kashmir into a global literary legibility" (2, 4)

in some ways, he Persianizes Emily Dickinson, repeating the Amherst poet's words (Ali lived, worked, and was ultimately buried in Amherst) in such a vein that we think of her brief, random mention of "Cashmere" as somehow central to her work (against all evidence to the contrary).

Perhaps this is what uprooted, interstitial poets like Ali do best – they bring two spaces together, each one changed by contact with the other, and produce not just two slightly different vocabularies, but also a third, completely new efflorescence, something which is neither Sophocles retold on a Kashmiri lake, nor an Anglicized ghazal, but a strange new voice (perhaps what Foucault once called "the thought from outside"). There is a historical aspect to this process too, however – in fact, you could argue that Ali's work has always seen history (including Kashmiri history) as a similar set of oscillating influences and fusions, which is where the poet's own frustrations with the violent homogenizing of an Indian nation state come to the fore. One of *Country*'s most poignant poems is "Farewell," an imagined love letter between a Kashmiri Muslim and a Kashmiri Pandit. Despite its star-cross'd lovers feel, the poem also works as a wider series of reflections on the gradual separation of two identities:

> In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
> Your history gets in the way of my memory. (22)

Without lapsing into either sentimentality or fake anti-nationalist nostalgia, the poet carefully presents the contours and mechanisms of how "others" are made, the subtle tricks of differentiation and self-differentiation which enable us to disavow the past, even pretend it never happened. Through a simple yet brilliant fusion of political and personal, of micro and macro, Ali takes the frustration of a failed love and applies it on multiple levels – political, existential, ideological:

> There is everything to forgive. You can't forgive me.
> If only somehow you could have been mine,
> what would not have been possible in this world? (22)

A sentimental "could-have-been" element in the poem becomes suddenly, massively something else – a moment of (as Pheng Cheah would have it) "unworlding,"[3] where the temporality of our lived experience with others ceases to infuse our world as a meaningful thing (Cheah 95). The poem becomes a melancholy reflection on the loss of possibility, and the kinds of world that expire once this loss becomes irreversible.

A second function of myth in Ali's poems is slightly more complicated to expound: it introduces a second kind of time, one which sets up a tension

3 Obviously the term belongs to Heidegger, but I am referring to the use Cheah makes of it in his book.

alongside historical time, and creates a flurry of consequences for the text itself. Seven years earlier, on another continent, the Latin American critic Roberto Echevarría had already written a book on the subject of myth, history and the Latin American novel. Concentrating on figures such as Borges and Marquez, Echevarría claimed "the modern Latin American novel transforms Latin American history into an originary myth in order to see itself as other" (14).[4] The idea that there is a productive tension between historical time and mythical time – one which creates a kind of self-alienation, and produces a new kind of subject in the process (as we have just mentioned above) – perhaps explains why Ali is so fond of myth, and returns to it in poem after poem. Of course, this fascination with the becoming-myth of all history could also easily have been infected in him from his Western influences, Yeats and Eliot (an epigraph from Yeats' "Easter, 1916" is found at the beginning of "I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight"). But we do not need to go to Yeats and terrible beauties being born to understand how a Kashmiri poet, viewing the atrocities in his homeland during the 90s from the viewpoint of an American college town, became fascinated by this relationship between mythical time and historical time; how history becomes myth, and how myth changes history, runs like a thread throughout *Country*. In this respect, references to Leda or Thea or Elijah are not merely there to "internationalize" or even "universalize" Ali's subject matter, although they incontestably do; myth also initiates a process which subtly begins to "other" the poet's own experiences, (recollected in the relative tranquility of Massachusetts), transforming the very fabric of Ali's own experience. As a result, the historical time of Kashmir as a region is stretched to match its mythic parameters, a gesture which also involves the mythologization of recent events too. In the "1993" section of "The City of Daughters," the poet follows a line from a Mexican poet ("God's secret: He put His lips to my ear/and didn't say a thing") with a line from a friend's letter: "Dear Shahid, they burned the Palladium" (82). The sublimity of *Country* is often generated by these juxtapositions of classical references and contemporary reports, which the poet accomplishes masterfully, albeit at the expense of a local audience unfamiliar with the foreign reference. Often the reference is not so much foreign as provocative – in "A History of Paisley," Ali mixes an origin tale for the vale of Kashmir (Parvati arguing with Shiva and running away in her anklets, until the God catches up with her to reconcile) with the destruction of Srinagar in the present, all imagined through the gaze of an "ancient … trader," one who does not hear the "bullets drowning out the bells of her anklets" (67). The poem takes place in three staggered times – mythical, Moghul, modern – and cleverly transforms the image of Parvati, fleeing across the valley, into a local girl, fleeing a razed city as the military roll in.

4 For more on this, see Ian Almond, *World Literature Decentered*, Routledge, 2021.

Are there any dangers in this free use of myth – Greek, Hindu, Biblical, Nordic, Indo-Islamic – to warp and change and transform the poet's own subject? Perhaps only one: not necessarily the familiar and already mentioned danger of an elitist aesthetics, one which relies on a lifetime's reading to catch the allusions of two dozen poems; rather, there is the possibility that the rich spectrum of mythic and cultural references *Country* offers actually empties Kashmir itself of any identity or content. Pulled in a dozen directions by a host of references – some of them Western, some Persian, some Islamic, some Vedic – one can imagine a posthumous attack on Ali's legacy, one in which the military occupation of Srinagar, the atrocities suffered by Kashmiris, are so riddled and poeticized with different vocabularies, that in the end we lose sight of the actual land and people itself. Kashmir, if you like, is so multiply signified in *Country* that it ceases to signify anything at all. It is certainly not my argument – but I confess, I would feel remiss not to mention it.

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