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# AGAINST MINORITIZATION: FIVE STRATEGIES FOR WORLD LITERATURE

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**global Anglophone**

**minor literatures**

**multilingualism**

**relay translation**

**world literature**

*This essay reflects on the paradox of how the twenty-first-century opening up of comparative literature to non-Western literatures under the aegis of world literature has coincided with the age of global Anglophone and the virtual minoritization of all non-Anglophone literatures. This is a remarkably different outcome from earlier globalized conjunctures – of orientalism and empire, or decolonization and the Cold War. This essay argues that a comparison with the dynamics of those earlier moments can bring into relief the difference of the current Anglocentric position – a position that assumes that anything not already visible in English is probably not worth knowing. The second half of the essay moves beyond a comparative critique of these practices of invisibilization and illustrates five of the many ways of looking at the minor that are at the heart of this special issue. These are: the cultivation of an attitude of curiosity and a sense of unknowing; a robust use of the traditionally disparaged practice of indirect translations; a strong and explicitly avowed political interest; the cultivation of a multilingual sensibility; and, lastly, the active signalling of literary works and worlds beyond English in Anglophone works. This last practice goes beyond exhibiting traces of other languages, either explicitly*

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*or implicitly. The essay develops one example of Anglophone world literature that does not minoritize other literatures and in that way cuts across traditional vertical accounts of the relation between major and minor: the writings of English and Urdu writer Aamer Hussein, which actively works in traces and references to other language texts and traditions, and features characters who live across language worlds and are nourished by different literary traditions. By discussing alternative modes of reading, translation, circulation, and writing, the essay explores the interplay between critical and aesthetic discourses of minority.*

## The present conjuncture

This special issue goes to the heart of what appears as a great paradox: the exciting opening up of comparative literature to non-Western literatures under the aegis of world literature since the 2000s has coincided with the virtual minoritization of *all* non-Anglophone literatures under the global Anglophone. Not just Catalan, Kurdish, or Yiddish, but also Italian, French, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, and so on – in other words, even literatures with substantial presence in earlier understandings of world literature. While conferences, panels, research projects, and book series explore and connect more and more literary worlds and significant geographies, literature translated from languages other than English occupies less and less shelf space in bookshops and book review columns. In British bookshops and newspapers, for example, a non-Anglophone writer has to be a Nobel prize winner or an internationally bestselling author like Murakami Haruki in order to get a look in at all. One or two translated authors "cover" major languages and countries – Jenny Erpenbeck and Daniel Kehlmann for German, Elena Ferrante for Italian. Even a global newspaper like *The Guardian* that prizes itself on its worldwide news coverage almost completely invisibilizes non-English books and literature, creativity and thought: translated books are very seldom reviewed, and usually without a sense of the literary field from which they stem. I call these practices invisibil*ization* and minorit*ization* because, though unwieldy, these words help us to think about these processes as continuous and repetitive – indeed routine – that individually may not appear to amount to much, but cumulatively produce significant consequences.[1] Yet, to view this opposition as one between scholarship and the market would be a mistake, since scholarship and the market are involved on both sides of the paradox.[2]

On one side, the growth of English as the lingua franca of the globalized economy (Business English Lingua Franca or BELF), education (which produces future readers and writers), and conglomerate publishing since the 1980s coincided with the boom of postcolonial literature in academia and

1 This is, of course, not the only meaning of the literary minor: in "Archives of Minority", for example, Laetitia Zecchini reads the "minority" of English-language

in the book market.[3] Postcolonial authors have abounded on the shortlists and among the winners of the Booker Prize since its establishment in 1992 (Moseley 2021) and have commercially done very well as a result (Brouillette 2007; Ponzanesi 2014). Postcolonial literature has been very successful in shining a critical light on historical and enduring structures of colonialism and non-European histories and perspectives and in destabilizing and "provincializing" British and American English. Morphed into global Anglophone literature or world literature in English, it appears to cover the whole world and tell all the urgent and important stories that need to be told. In *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (2015), Rebecca Walkowitz argues that even many contemporary British and US authors now choose to show how English is not their or their characters' "natural language". But if "anglophone novels such as [Jamaica Kincaid's] *Mr. Potter* and [Mohsin Hamid's] *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* have incorporated translation, suggesting that multilingualism is present even within what appears to be 'your language'", Walkowitz provocatively asks, "do we need to read books in translation or books composed in languages other than English? Have we managed to encounter multilingualism without ever having to leave English?" (2015, 201). Indeed, university courses and positions in "World literatures in English" now routinely posit the plurality of literatures in English while absorbing world literature within English departments, thereby making other literatures invisible or irrelevant.

On the other side of the equation, world literature scholarship, especially but not exclusively on the European continent, has continued to make the plurality of literatures in the world's languages *visible* and to highlight their vitality, whether it is in Alexander Beecroft's (2015) spacious model of scalar ecologies of world literature, Ottmar Ette's notion of "transarea" (2016), the Swedish research group on world literary vernaculars led by Stefan Helgesson, or the centrifugal *Cambridge History of World Literature* edited by Debjani Ganguly (2021), to name just a few. As for book publishing, recently readership of translations has grown in the UK more than for English-language books (Anderson 2019). Several new prizes – like the International Booker Prize (2005), the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF 2008), and, most recently, the National Book Critics Circle's Gregg Barrios Book in Translation Prize (2021) – expressly aim at raising the international profile of translations of literary works not in English. Recent Nobel prizes for literature have shown up Anglophone publishers as slow on the uptake, and have confirmed that it is small publishers rather than the Big Five that enable the circulation of world literature.[4] In other words, despite the overwhelming visibility of Anglo-American authors in the marketplace and in academia and the resulting Anglocentrism, both scholarship and the book market are a field of contending forces.

poets in India less as "a *predicament* than a condition of worldliness, of singularity and emancipation – a 'resource'" (2022, 270).

2 I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pushing me to rework this section.

3 As Majeed (2021) puts it, "preference for English as a global lingua franca has also been conditioned by and correlates with the expansion of the digitalized knowledge economy". The global consolidation and penetration of large publishing conglomerates also rides on the strength of global English education.

4 As the *Guardian* editorial on the occasion of the Nobel Prize to Annie

Ernaux points out, she "has given the publishing house Fitzcarraldo its second Nobel prize win in four years, following on from Poland's Olga Tokarczuk. More startlingly, however, as Fitzcarraldo also now publishes Elfriede Jelinek and Svetlana Alexievich, the imprint has close to a 25% share in the 17 women to have won since 1901" (*Guardian* 2022).

Moreover, before we rush to explain away minoritization and invisibilization as the inevitable consequences of globalization, it is useful to point out that earlier globalizing and globalized conjunctures, like those of empire and orientalism or of decolonization and the Cold War, worked quite differently. In both cases, relay translations and political interest led to a dramatic increase in the visibility of literatures beyond the Western world, blind spots notwithstanding (Orsini 2020a). Pausing on the dynamics of those earlier moments, as this essay partly does, helps us appreciate the differences in the current Anglocentric position, which first invisibilizes literature and thought not in English and then concludes that what is not already visible in English is probably not worth knowing, and certainly not "world".

The essay offers five propositions as antidotes to this position, in favour of a notion of world literature less concerned with hierarchies and more with plural trajectories – a commitment that is at the heart of this special issue as a whole. These propositions are the cultivation of an attitude of curiosity and a sense of unknowing, which I suggest should spill over from our experience as readers of world literature to our scholarly engagement with it; a revaluation of the traditionally disparaged practice of relay translation to ensure visibility for literatures for which no direct translators are available; the recognition of political engagement as a power force in world literature, a recognition that multiplies the avenues and genres of world literature (tracts, diaries, songs; see Hutt 2016) beyond the market and the novel; the cultivation of a multilingual sensibility attuned to voices, presences and absences, histories and genres in other languages in and around texts; and, finally, the active signalling in Anglophone works of literary works and worlds beyond English. Most of these propositions are pragmatic and work at different levels – circulation, translation, reception, and form – and bring us close to the ethos of what this issue calls "pluralization". The essay ends with the example of Aamer Hussein as an author who writes in English without minoritizing other languages and literatures. An endlessly curious reader and prolific reviewer of world literature, Hussein exceeds the identities of British Asian or diasporic Pakistani writer, though he is comfortable in both. Translation, whether direct or mediated, runs through his books, and multilingualism is crucial to his poetics, his life, and his writing. Hussein has a place in the British literary establishment but also inhabits multilingual London – the two only partly overlap.

## Curiosity, not mastery

"[W]orld literature is not an object, it's a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading

more texts." Franco Moretti's opening salvo in his "Conjectures on World Literature" challenged scholars to take "a leap, a wager" (2000, 54). World literature beckons at the beginning of the essay as a vast "great unread" (Cohen 2002, 23) drawing European comparatists out of their comfort zone. The anxiety provoked by this "great unread" is not met by an invitation to surrender and get lost, metaphorically speaking, in the corridors of the library of Babel, but rather by a crisp systemic model that allows the author, by the end of the essay, to recoup mastery and offer a general "law of literary evolution" (Moretti 2000, 58; see also Moretti 2006). Mastery is of course something that we are encouraged to develop and display as scholars, but is it a good starting point for scholarly and readerly explorations in world literature?

Another anxiety of mastery is that dramatized by Rebecca Walkowitz in *Born Translated* – that of the "serious reader" vis-à-vis translation:

> Serious readers are anxious about reading in translation, which seems to lack rigor of several sorts. It lacks scholarly rigor because we are blocked from analyzing the metaphors and idioms that have seemed crucial to any substantial investigation of literature. It lacks educational rigor because we have failed to learn the languages that would allow more direct access. And it lacks ethical rigor because the failure to learn a sufficient number of languages bespeaks a failure of interest in and engagement with the imaginative life of strangers. Of course, it is not only the reader of the translated object but also the object itself that is implicated. For after all, what kind of literary work could be read – read in any way that would count – in some language other than its own? (Walkowitz 2015, 171)

To a non-monolingual Anglophone reader like myself, this seems an extreme position, one that may better depict the scholarly ethos of the language student or the literary comparativist rather than that of the average reader and that risks turning one into a "literary xenophobe" (Morgan 2015). As an Italian reader, it was and is simply unthinkable for me to read world literature without translation – how else would I read Tolstoy or Flaubert or Jane Austen or the *Arabian Nights*? But, to go back to the present conjuncture, it seems that the global Anglophone has made it possible to think of world literature without translation, thereby doing away with the anxiety of translation.

Let us go back to our basic attitude to world literature as readers. How did *you* become a reader of world literature? If I became one by haunting second-hand bookshops in Milan in Italy, where books were stacked by genre, publisher, country, and alphabetically, enabling multiple strategies of discovery, Kanupriya Dhingra (2022) credits the large second-hand book market on the footpaths of Old Delhi in India as a more democratic, bountiful, and inclusive space than the city's "proper" bookshops. In parallel bookshops or markets one finds books otherwise unavailable, and at much cheaper prices; such

"finds" supplement and broaden the knowledge of world literature provided by the curriculum. These often chaotic and expansive spaces create their own anxiety, but they also encourage curiosity and a random, exploratory approach to reading. Curiosity is an attitude that springs from the recognition of one's ignorance. In this context, it stems from a less anxious sense of world literature as a great unknown, so that however encyclopaedic one's reading may be, there is always more out there waiting to be discovered. Curiosity creates an ethics of reading world literature in which one is ready to question one's expectations and tastes, rather than assuming them to be transparent or universal. In fact, cultivating curiosity as a counter to assumptions of universality explodes the distinction between curiosity and critique. A critical attitude, in this perspective, depends on relinquishing mastery.

Ann Morgan's *A Year of Reading the World* (2015) shows how to transform from an unselfconscious Anglophone reader into a curious reader of world literature. Her year-long project of reading a book in every recognized language in the world started from the realization that although – or because – she was a well-read graduate in English literature working in publishing, she was an unwitting "literary xenophobe":

> I glanced up at my bookshelves, the proud record of more than twenty years of reading, and found a host of British and North American greats staring down at me … They were great friends, all of them, and I loved them dearly, but now that I came to think about it weren't they all a little, well, Western?
>
> Worse, apart from a dog-eared copy of *Madame Bovary* and a jumbled assortment of Freuds … there seemed to be nothing at all in translation. And not because I had been reading books in their original, I hasten to add.
>
> No. I had barely touched a work by a foreign-language author in years. My literary diet consisted largely of highly processed British and American staples, most of which had to have been sampled by at least two major media outlets. (Morgan 2015, 7)

Her blog and book document her adventurous journey, from the early anxieties about "where to start" and how to "read it all" to musings on the algorithms offering similar reading experiences to the ones one has just had, thereby creating a false sense of sameness while making other books invisible. In the process, Morgan has become a great champion of literature in translation, as her project continues well beyond the initial target.

Such an attitude of curiosity, non-mastery, and sense of unknowing serves us well as scholars of the burgeoning field of world literature. It translates into a robust scepticism towards generalizations, a single "Eurochronology" (Appadurai 1996), and simple models seeking to master the complexity of world literature. In the Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies (MULOSIGE) research project I led, we conceived of the world as criss-

crossed by multiple stories and trajectories (Massey 2005). Even a fairly limited set of literary relations – like those between China, Russia, and India in the twentieth century – reveals a host of stories, positions, tastes, and reworkings that exceed the paradigms of left internationalism and the Cold War. These include the sojourn in China of avant-garde writer and theorist Sergei Tret'iakov, the future editor of the Russian magazine *International Literature*, who taught Russian at Beijing University in 1924–1925, and that of Josip Brodsky's father, the military photographer Aleksandr Brodsky, who was posted in China after World War II, from where he brought back objects that surface in the poetic memories of his émigré son (Gamsa 2021; Tyerman 2021). These literary relations include the small graphic novels known in Chinese as *lianhuanhua*, which played an important role in popularizing Soviet literary works in the 1950s (Volland 2021), but also, after the Cultural Revolution, the Hindi romantic novels of Gulshan Nanda (Jia 2019b). Nor should we be mesmerized by evidence of literary connections: Mangalagiri (2023) urges us to focus on "disconnect" as a form of (critical, difficult, rejected) connection. She points, for example, to the presence under erasure of Chinese poetry in Hindi after the 1962 Chinese aggression saw off a long decade of brotherly ties between China and India.

Unknowing is an unnerving attitude for scholars used to working with a single language or corpus. As someone who first became a Hindi literature specialist and then a multilingual comparatist of northern Indian literatures, I am still reluctant to write on literatures "I don't know." At the same time, the opening of my horizons onto the literatures of the Maghreb, the Horn of Africa, and other parts of Africa through the MULOSIGE project has been nothing short of exhilarating.

## Visibility and relay translation

Relay translation is one of the taboos of literary translation, viscerally opposed by authors and translators and running counter to the current assumptions governing interlingual translation (Ringmar 2012; Washbourne 2013). UNESCO recommended in 1976 that recourse to relay translations be made "only where absolutely necessary" (cited in Ringmar 2012, 142). Looming large behind such opposition is a post-romantic understanding of translation as a priori inferior to the original and Walter Benjamin's dictum that the nucleus of a text ("wesenhafte Kern") does not lend itself to translation and cannot, by implication, be retranslated (Ringmar 2012, 142). In practice, however, scholars have pointed out the historically widespread and crucial role of practices of relay translations (Hermans 1999).

In fact, I have come to doubt whether it is possible to imagine a rich and robust world literature without relay translation, when the alternative is no translation, and therefore no visibility or familiarity. The first volume of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* appeared in Italian only in 1999, that too via English (Toer 1999): Italian readers would still be waiting for a direct translation from Indonesian. And if we look back at previous conjunctures of world literature – the age of empire or the decolonizing and Cold War decades of the 1950s to 1970s – relay translations played a crucial role in making literatures of the world visible and accessible.

In the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, the classical literatures of Asia and the Middle East were made visible and accessible to Western readers by "Oriental translators". Some were orientalist scholars who undertook direct but consciously literary translations for general readers (Italia 2020). But some of the most successful and prolific Oriental translators – like Adolphe Thalasso in French and E. Powys Mathers in English – were keen readers of translations rather than polyglots themselves (Orsini 2020b). Powys Mathers' recreation of the Sanskrit poem *Fifty Stanzas of the Love-Thief* (*Caurapañcāśikā*) as *Black Marigolds* (1919), for instance, is one of the most successful and reproduced translations of Sanskrit poetry, complete with pastiche stanzas of his own making (Italia 2020). His twelve-volume *Eastern Love* includes texts from Morocco to South-East and East Asia, all retranslated from other Oriental translators (Powys Mathers 1928–1930).[5]

5 "I can lay claim to a very small smattering of Sanskrit and Arabic; but that does not affect the question, for everything in the present series is translated at second-hand" (Powys Mathers 1928–1930, 12:92–93).

Whether rendering Japanese waka, Urdu ghazals, or Laotian folk songs, Powys Mathers followed Ezra Pound in employing a poetic register that emphasizes vivid and sensuous images within simple syntactical structures. He created a pliable translational language that was less concerned with formal aspects of metre and more with conveying memorable images and a direct poetic voice. This translation of a ghazal couplet by the eighteenth-century Urdu poet Mir Taqi Mir, for example, comes without the characteristic double final rhyme. Parataxis breaks up the tight conceit of familiar images (starlike tears, hair black as night), further defamiliarized through synesthesia ("thoughts … woven … with raindrops"). The pathetic, confessional tone evokes an individualized emotional subjectivity instead of the more controlled and diffuse one that is typical of the ghazal:

> Joy fills my eyes, remembering your hair, with tears,
> And these tears roll and shine;
> Into my thoughts are woven a dark night with raindrops
> And the rolling and shining of love songs. (Powys Mathers 1920, 76)[6]

6 Translating Thalasso (1906, 222–223): "Au souvenir de tes longs cheveux noirs, le bonheur / emplit mes

Having a translation or retranslation as source text gave the Oriental translator a peculiar freedom, which easily slid into creating one's own original

yeux de larmes, et ces larmes en / roulant brillent sur mes joues, / Et je ne sais pourquoi en les voyant rouler je pense / à une nuit très sombre, à des gouttes de pluie, / et à des lueurs de vers luisants."

7 See Powys Mathers (1928–1930, 12:120–122). I thank Maddalena Italia for this information.

text, be it a pastiche of existing verses or a whole fictive persona, like the Chinese poet "Julius Wing" created by Powys Mathers.[7]

Powys Mathers made no secret of translating mainly from the French, in particular from Adolphe Thalasso's anthology *Amour Asiatique* (1906), a truly impressive collection of translations and retranslations from thirty-odd languages. The spread was made possible by French, British, Russian, and Ottoman orientalist scholarship, and by multiple trajectories of imperial expansion and ethnographic exploration in West Asia, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia, East Asia, Indo-China, and South Asia (including Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and Nepal). But the circulation loop went further. Powys Mathers' English retranslations of Thalasso became the source text for some of the earliest translations of Asian poetry in Urdu, by poet and translator Miraji, who published them in Urdu literary magazines in the 1930s and 1940s without acknowledging his sources (Orsini 2020b). Miraji's translations from "East and West" (reprinted in Miraji 1999) were all done from English. This may appear to fit the hierarchical "translational world system" (Heilbron 1999) in which, as a rule, the intermediate text (IT) is in a dominating language and the original source language (SL) and possibly the target language (TL) are in "dominated" languages (Ringmar 2012, 143). Instead, I would argue that English here becomes the medium of a translation project that "provincializes" English poetry, not just vis-à-vis European poetry in French, Russian, and German, but also in relation to Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian literatures. In other words, retranslation, rather than being a marker of Urdu's domination by English, allows Miraji to re-orient Urdu readers and poets towards other traditions (Orsini 2020b).

The usual arguments against relay translations apply to both Powys Mathers and Miraji: these translations are creative if not distorting; they muddle and obscure authorship, ignore historicity, and mirror the translators' prejudices (in the case of Oriental translators, against modern writing). But my point is that without relay translation neither Miraji nor Powys Mathers or Thalasso could have undertaken such ambitious translation projects. Without relay translation, this vast and differentiated poetic corpus would not have become visible and accessible to readers in Europe and India, and these expansive horizons of world poetry could not have been imagined. The same is true of other ambitious projects, such as the early translations of Indian literature into Chinese (Jia 2019a). Before Chinese translators from languages like Bengali, Hindi, or Urdu could be trained, Chinese translations of Indian texts relied on Russian. Hindi magazines relied on English translations, themselves relayed through multiple translation loops. The corollary is that the current decline in indirect translations into and through English and French (or Spanish, German, Russian, and so on) has meant a dramatic decline in the visibility of world literary

texts, particularly those in minor languages (Alvstad 2017). In other words, relay translation can become a strategy against minoritization.

## A strong political interest

One of the aspects of Pascale Casanova's (2004) masterful *The World Republic of Letters* that, in my view, undermines her edifice is its insistence on literary autonomy as a universally shared value and trajectory – a notion derived from Pierre Bourdieu's narrative of the French literary field as progressively freeing itself from the heteronomous pressures of politics and of the market (Bourdieu 1993). Casanova traces a similar trajectory for world literature under the rubric of "depoliticization":

> Little by little, however, literature succeeded in freeing itself of the political and national authorities that originally it helped to establish and legitimize. The accumulation of specifically literary resources, which involved the invention and deployment of a set of aesthetic possibilities, of forms, narrative techniques, and formal solutions … allowed literary space to gradually achieve independence and determine its own laws of operation. Freed from its former condition of political dependency, literature found itself at last in a position to assert its own *autonomy*. (Casanova 2004, 37; my emphasis)

Conversely, political interest – whether ideological affiliation, international cultural diplomacy, national soft power, or downright propaganda – has arguably underpinned and underpins much of the impulse towards world literature, within and even more outside academia. This was certainly true of the post-World War II period of decolonization, Cold War and Third Worldism, which fuelled multiple projects of literary internationalism by government and non-government actors (Orsini, Srivastava, and Zecchini 2022). At one end of the spectrum, there were the large-scale translation and publishing projects sponsored as a form of soft power by governments and foundations in the US, the USSR, and China, which often drew on and spawned retranslations (Barnhisel and Turner 2010; Davis 2020; Djagalov 2020; Volland 2017). Then, there were smaller but no less ambitious projects like the trilingual magazine *Lotus*, established by the Afro-Asian Writers' Association in 1968, which relied on networks of writers and of dedicated local translators in Egypt and published texts by African, Asian (and Left Bloc) authors in Arabic, French, and English (Halim 2012).

Other, more local forms of literary activism drew selectively on this wealth of translations to articulate their own visions of Third World and world literature. Kamleshwar, the Hindi writer and editor of the mainstream short

story magazines *Naī Kahāniyān* (New Stories) and *Sārikā* (Starling) in the 1960s and 1970s, drew upon magazines and anthologies published in Europe, the USA, Asia, and Africa, picking out non-Western stories to project an image of world literature that was distinctly oriented towards the decolonizing world (Orsini 2022). Kamleshwar's editorials show that this (re)translation project was politically conscious, even though aesthetically it was not aligned with either Bloc and freely combined realism with modernism. In his and other enterprises, political interest led to investing in translations.

Thinking back to the contrast between the profusion of and investment in translations in the Cold War and decolonization period and our present global Anglophone conjuncture, it is easy to read this shrinking (only) as a victory of the market and of global capitalism over politics. But I think this would be simplistic. For one thing, there is no dearth of political internationalism and literary activism today, in many places and at many levels, from online magazines to e-market sites. In fact, many projects of literary activism revolve around the translation and visibilization of voices from minor literatures neglected by large publishers, such as African language e-market websites Market 54 and Akiddie and websites like Write Ghana and Bakwa (Adjirakor 2021; Krishnan 2021). If the global Anglophone means that the number of second-language English readers worldwide has grown, then there is even greater need for English to make other literatures visible and carry them into other languages.

## The cultivation of a multilingual sensibility

Of course, languages stand in unequal relationships to each other – English, Hindi, Urdu, and Bhojpuri in India; French, Arabic Fusaha, colloquial Darija, and Amazigh in the Maghreb; Amharic, Oromo, Somali, and other indigenous languages in Ethiopia, and so on. But during our MULOSIGE project, we also found that to think of languages *only* in terms of hierarchy and power relations means overlooking the fact that, for individuals and communities, languages and poetic idioms also carry strong aesthetic and affective power. Particularly within multilingual societies – and the contention of our project is that most societies are multilingual – individuals in the course of their ordinary lives become familiar with several idioms and aesthetic, inhabit them in their bodies, and long for them when they cannot access them. We need only think of folktales and lullabies, film and pop songs, poems and rhetorical genres performed on ritual occasions, and so on. Cultivating a multilingual sensibility means paying attention to the presence (or latence) and power of these idioms even within monolingual authors

and texts. An author like Luigi Meneghello, for instance, consciously evokes the oral world of dialect, but also of Church Latin, in his works, starting with *Libera nos a Malo* (1963). Cultivating a multilingual sensibility also means shifting and broadening our definition of literature to include songs and verbal art, whether in regard to regional dialects and the Italian *canzone d'autore* (Gelsomino 2004) or Yoruba neotraditionalist *akewi* or chanter of poetry (Fasan 2011). Finally, it means developing a critical vocabulary that goes beyond "influence", "belonging", or "power" and considering embodied practices of reading, viewing, and listening. Power and hierarchy are crucial, but we must also factor in taste, which combines aesthetic and affective dimensions. At the Multilingual London literary festival that the MULOSIGE project organized in November 2020, writers reflected on the role of their family languages in their lives and works even though they write in English. London poets in Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, and Somali recited their poems in the original languages, with only written translations provided. For the audience, and for the poets themselves, the recitation made them experience the affective and aesthetic power of sounds and syntax, and revealed London to be a multilingual *literary* city in unsuspected ways. For writers and audience members whose relationship to their putative mother tongues is tenuous and a site of shame or regret, the festival validated the realization that bodies and tastes carry memories of these languages even when we are not proficient in them.

Strategies for broadening our critical vocabulary include thinking of languages not as "belonging to" but as "used by" people, and thinking about access to languages and poetic idioms instead of mastery of them. Access includes exposure through hearing or overhearing, and partial and imperfect understanding, or even no understanding at all. In India, where Urdu is definitely a disempowered and subjugated language in educational and political terms, the extraordinary revival of Urdu storytelling or *dastangoi* and the runaway success of the multilingual and multiscriptual website Rekhta and its festival *Jashn-e Rekhta* among non-Urdu speakers testify to the powerful aesthetic and affective pull that Urdu still exerts among new generations.[8] Once again, the point is not to deny the existence of language hierarchies, but to consciously acknowledge the presence and pull of other languages within people, places, and sometimes texts.

8 See https://jashnerekhta.org (accessed 1 May 2022).

## Beyond born translated

My final proposition loops back to Walkowitz's rhetorical question about whether "born translated" global Anglophone literature will make translations from other language literatures redundant. As a counter-example, let me point to the writings of the Anglo-Pakistani (or Pakistani-English)

writer Aamer Hussein, who was feted as part of the first generation of diasporic Asian writers in Britain but who has himself become a kind of minor writer in English, in terms of the forms he privileges and the position he occupies. His increasingly miniature and shape-shifting story collections in English and Urdu are now published only in Pakistan.[9] Hussein himself was born in Karachi and studied in India before moving to London in his teens, where he says he hung out with friends from the Middle East, Italy, and East Asia rather than the Pakistani/South Asian community. Hussein grew up with Urdu, Hindi, and English, but went on to study Farsi and Urdu at SOAS, where he was particularly taken by Persian poetry and Urdu women's writing at the turn of the twentieth century. This moment of (re)discovery is one he often returns to, and he went on to edit a collection of translations of Urdu short stories by Pakistani women writers (Hussein 2005). Hussein also learnt Italian well, and is a fluent Italian speaker and reader, with a particular fondness for Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese. His characters are often artists, poets, or writers who talk and reflect on what they read and write. He mostly writes in English but thinks and dreams in both English and Urdu. His stories, which sometimes start in Urdu and get translated or rewritten in English or vice versa, often deal with fleeting encounters or long-term friendships between characters who are in transit or have crossed worlds and live across languages. "Saintīs pul"/"Bridges" follows a daylong conversation between the narrator and a Turkish friend as they walk around Paris and discuss their respective writings, retracing their friendship and the turns and changes their peripatetic lives have taken.[10]

9 By Shahbano Alvi's Ushba International in Karachi.

10 It was translated from Urdu by his mother, Sabiha Ahmed Hussein (Hussein 2018).

His most recent story collections, *Hermitage* (2018) and *Zindagī se pahle* [*Before Life*] (2020), contain exquisite short pieces of fiction and translation, entire lives evoked in a few deft touches or poetically rendered Sufi fables and classical stories pared to the essential. "The Lady of the Lotus", for example, draws on an old diary of his mother's who was singing and training in Hindustani music while she worked as a magazine editor in Karachi. The brief entries relate exclusively to her singing and follow the at times contrary, at times revelatory sessions with her singing teacher, her *ustad*:

> *She notes her deadlines in the diary, but she doesn't write about driving her children to school in the mornings … or picking them up for lunch … She doesn't record the passing of the seasons, the walks to the lake in the mild evening breeze, the flowers and fruit she grows, or the frangipani fallen on wet grass or picked off the branch in the morning for her hair.* (Hussein 2018, 28–29)

The title refers to the English translation of a medieval Persian romance from her native Malwa in central India, but it could well refer to the mother herself. The brief entries and comments spread over seven pages evoke a

life lived to the brim, as the photograph of the singer by a *tanpura*, smiling radiantly in a silk sari with flowers in her hair, shows. At the end, only the musical notations ("*re ma pa dha ma ga re/g ani sa*" [33]) of the pieces she has been learning remain, mere traces of a presence and a language that can no longer be heard.

Hussein's (2009) short novel *Another Gulmohar Tree* starts with three fables: the first is about orphaned Usman and a generous talking frog; the second is about Rokeya, who longs for a deer who appeared in her garden but which she was forced to give up; and the third is about crocodiles who made a pact with a rich farmer and now demand his daughter, who follows them to their kingdom, where she becomes the crocodile commander's bride. Her parents and brothers follow her to the crocodile kingdom, where they gradually grow scales and long snouts. Only one brother, Bilal, manages to return home. Fragmented and intertwined over several pages, the fables establish a state of suspension in a luminous, simple prose; but they also break the fable form by withdrawing the clinching moral at the end. Sections 4 and 5, from the first and second stories, appear on opposite pages, but become mingled in section 23, when Rokeya comes across Usman's frog and brings it to him:

4

Usman sat beneath the tree and sang his song. The frog didn't emerge from the overflowing pond.

The days went by as he sat there, until the bread he had brought was as hard as the stones around him and the milk in his flask had turned sour.He kept on singing.

5

You shouldn't make pets of wild things, Rokeya's mother said. When I was a child a peacock flew into our garden. It stayed for three days on our roof, dancing and screeching, until the father of the lonely children to whom it belonged came to take it away.

No, you must never make pets of wild things. No deer, no peacock, they long for their forests and the longing brings bad luck.

But Rokeya had seen the peacock spread its fan. Its colours shone like the mirrors in the sun.

I'll take you to your friend, Rokeya said to the frog. Come, sit on my shoulder, and I'll take you there. I hear him singing every morning.

She placed the frog in the curve of her shoulder, in the shelter of her long hair.

She walks.

Listen!

Feast your fill, your fill …

They heard the distant echo of Usman's song. (Hussein 2009, 4–5, 23)

If intermingling the fables (4 and 5) rather than telling each one in turn already alters our reading of them by prolonging them and stressing the element of suspense, having the characters of two separate fables suddenly meet suggests an even stronger creative intervention, then a breach of the wall separating fables from lives told in fiction. Can fable characters actually change the course of the fable they are in?

The novel then switches to the story of Lidia Jagashvili, an Anglo-Georgian woman, and Usman, who has been working in London. They meet briefly in postwar London and then make a life for themselves in post-independence Karachi. Lidia paints, learns Urdu, and becomes Rokeya; she works and settles happily in a life of hectic domesticity among children and friends. Usman becomes an editor in a magazine office and writes social realist stories in Urdu; he is more restless, as if an exile in his own country. After a period of estrangement, Lidia and Usman rekindle their companionship by translating together Usman's fables, Urdu retellings of traditional tales that surprise literary editors and find popular acclaim among young and adult readers alike:

> In the best of these (which set a standard for other writers), a farmer gave his daughter as a bride to a crocodile kingdom in the depths of the river. They succumbed to its wealth and riches and decided to stay. (Hussein 2009, 79)

We now realize that the fables with which the novel opened are in fact Usman's, or perhaps Lidia's translation of them? And in a game of mirrors, the protagonists' names are also those of the fables' characters.

Like much of Aamer Hussein's fiction, particularly his recent collections *Hermitage* (2018) and *Restless* (2021b), *Another Gulmohar Tree* is "born translated", or perhaps born multilingual, not just because its characters speak (and learn) languages other than English and live across languages, but because the imaginative worlds they inhabit and enrich with their own writings and readings are expressly mentioned, their aesthetics and intellectual power explicitly discussed. This is what I mean by saying that Hussein is a writer who does not minoritize. In the novel, Usman's "severe style and the unpretentious integrity of his vision" have earned him the respect of writers and critics, including the "great poet Faiz", who praises him in print "more than once", and in "the young but intimidating critic Mumtaz Shirin, herself an acclaimed short story writer", who compares "the sound of his prose to brooklets of clear water running over rocks and stones in sunny weather" (Hussein 2009, 77). This mention of two of Pakistan's greatest poets can be taken as a realism effect, but it also shows that Urdu is not just a domain of spoken language, childhood memories, or oral folklore but is a living literary domain where mature critical reflection takes place. It is also a literature with a tradition in which different tastes and trends

coexist: Usman's "essays on every genre of literature, particularly those about classical Urdu poetry and traditional romances in Urdu and Punjabi", gain him "a formidable reputation as a critic", but "[e]ven his admirers made too much of the obscurity in which he wrote, somehow perpetuating the image of him as a recluse in a cave, or a rural story-teller who was out of touch with current trends" (Hussein 2009, 77). Even after Usman's fables become popular, the narrator takes up the mantle of the literary critic: Usman "continued to dip his bucket into the same well of folklore, though few of his later stories were ever as harsh, and some indulged themselves in a tear or two" (Hussein 2009, 79).

I take Aamer Hussein's writing as an example of Anglophone world literature that does *not* minoritize but makes visible, and welcomes, not just other languages – as Walkowitz's examples in *Born Translated* do – but also other literatures. This is because his writing and his attitude to languages and literatures represent so much of what I have been arguing for in this essay. Though English is the main language he writes in, he values Urdu and its literary tradition just as much; or rather, he does not relate to languages and literatures hierarchically. A longstanding reviewer of translations, his writings, teaching, and conversation reveal equal regard and unfailing curiosity for writing in any language, and he names Indonesian Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Italian Natalia Ginzburg, and Catalan Mercè Rodoreda as his favourite authors (personal communication). Hussein has cultivated a multilingual sensibility and writes and speaks eloquently about his journey back to Urdu (2021b, 1–6), and of his being at home in Urdu as in English … or indeed Italian. Writing recently about his early friendship with Han Suyin, he recalls the moment when he became a writer as one in which being a Third World writer was an empowering label and a hospitable tent for Asian, African, and Middle Eastern writers (Hussein 2021a). It is not by chance, I think, that he has been pivoting around short forms – stories, brief translations, diary entries, sketches, fragments of memoirs – which blur the boundaries between translations and original writings and between pieces written in English or translated into it. The same is true of his most recent *Restless: Instead of an Autobiography* (2021b), which deliberately moves between diary, memoir, and fiction. But could this be why he has himself become a minor writer in English, in London, and finds himself published and feted more in South Asia or in Europe?

I have pointed to Aamer Hussein's as an example of English writing that does *not* minoritize and is itself minor. His writing goes well beyond the paradigm of *Born Translated* in highlighting the presence not just of languages but also of literatures beyond English. In doing so, Hussein bears witness both to the workings of his multilingual sensibility and to the literary and human veins that animate and enrich his life. Talking to him, I have realized, is like connecting to my old self as a reader and discoverer of world literature.

How to hold on to that sense of discovery, reject the "technologies of recognition" (Shih 2004) that assimilate and subordinate literary texts and traditions from other parts of the world to a tired and inadequate Eurochronology, refuse the dictum to choose between language camps, and seek the stories and trajectories that dominant narratives obscure from view are tasks we can all take on. Rather than acquiescing to existing power structures, such a readerly and scholarly attitude questions the acquiescence to market notions of scale (bigger is better) characterizing systemic notions of world literature and the invisibilization and ignorance of the worlds beyond English that they produce.

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